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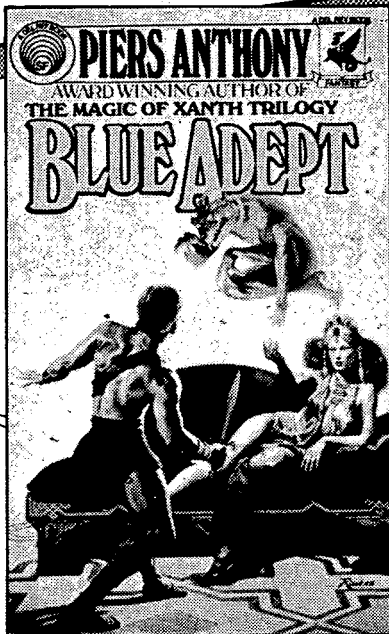
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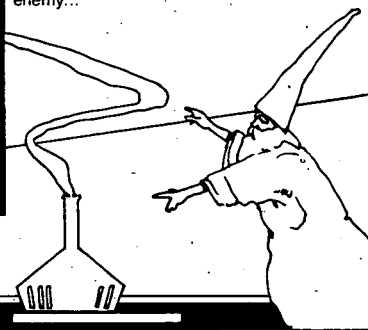
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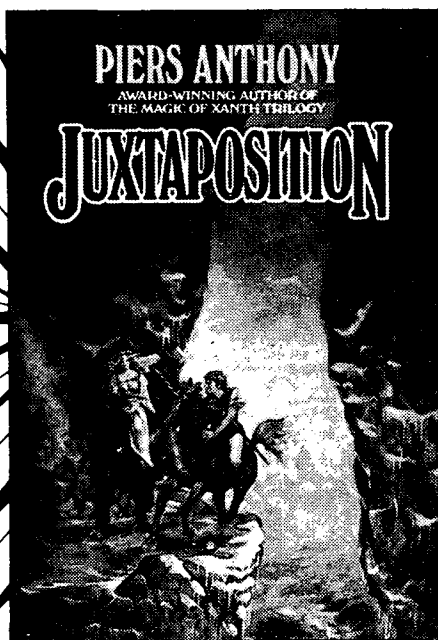
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EDITORIAL: **DON'T YOU BELIEVE?**

by Isaac Asimov

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One of the curses of being a well-known science fiction writer is that unsophisticated people assume you to be soft in the head. They come to you for refuge from a hard and skeptical world.

Don't you believe in flying saucers, they ask me? Don't you believe in telepathy? —in ancient astronauts? —in the Bermuda triangle? —in life after death?

No, I reply. No, no, no, no, and again no.

One person recently, goaded into desperation by the litany of unrelieved negation, burst out, "Don't you believe in *anything*?"

"Yes," I said. "I believe evidence. I believe observation, measurement, and reasoning, confirmed by independent observers. I'll believe anything, no matter how wild and ridiculous, if there is evidence for it. The wilder and more ridiculous something is, however, the firmer and more solid the evidence will have to be."

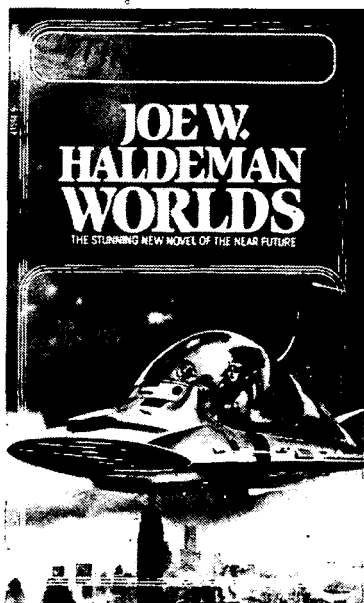
For instance, where do I stand on telepathy, which I consider among the less wild suggestions along the fringes of knowledge?

I don't consider telepathy to be intrinsically impossible. After all, the brain produces a small electromagnetic field; and the intensity of it wavers, rising and falling in irregular fashion, but with noticeable periodicities. These "brain waves" can be, and are, observed and measured by the technique of encephalography.

To be sure, the brain waves are the overall product of some ten billion neurons so that trying to make sense of them is like trying to make sense of the noise of the world's population all talking at once in all their various languages.

In listening to the world's overall human noise, we could hear it subside into a soft, drowsy hum when night covers a region; or hear it rise into loud discordance at the coming of catastrophe. In the

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case of encephalography, there are changes from waking to sleeping, and vice versa, that can be detected. One can also detect the presence of a tumor or an epileptic seizure.

But we want something better than that; we want something that would be analogous to hearing the world's noise, and picking out an individual conversation.

Might not specific thoughts affect the brain-wave pattern? Might not the wavering electromagnetic field then impress itself upon a neighbor-brain and induce that same thought upon it?

It is conceivable that this *might* happen; but the question is, is it conceivable that it *does* happen? Can one person detect another person's thoughts in actual practice?

Of course, we can read thoughts indirectly. From the tone of a person's voice, from the expression of a person's face, from bits of a person's unconscious behavior, we can sometimes tell if that person is lying. We might even be able to make a shrewd guess as to what he (or she) is thinking. The more experienced we are, and the better we know the person we are studying, the more likely we are to guess his thoughts.

But that is not what we mean by telepathy. Can one person sense another's thoughts *directly*?

Well, consider—

If you were born with the ability to sense the thoughts of others—surely that would give you a considerable advantage. To sense what others don't realize is being sensed; to have advance warnings of other's intentions; to find that no secret is hidden—surely that would increase your security no end.

It seems to me, then, that telepathic ability has great survival value, and that even a very limited and rudimentary telepathic ability would have considerable survival value. Telepaths would be better off, would live longer, and would have more children (who would also be telepathic, most likely). The principles of natural selection, it seems to me, would surely see to it that more and more people would be more and more efficiently telepathic as time went on.

In fact, we might liken telepathy to vision. The ability to sense light and analyze it for information about one's surroundings offers such an advantage that almost all life-forms, even quite primitive ones, have eyes of one sort or another. Very efficient eyes long antedate humanity itself.

Therefore, the mere fact that we are now trying to find out if telepathy exists—that there is any question of it at all—is, in itself,

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very strong evidence that it does *not* exist. If it did exist, it would by now be an overriding ability that we would all take for granted.

—But wait, I may be going too far. Animals that live out their lives in total darkness, are not likely to have eyes. It may be that telepathy has never developed on Earth because there have never been brains on Earth sufficiently complex to produce brain waves worth detection, or to receive them, once produced. Only now, in the case of *Homo sapiens*, are the conditions right, and that just barely. Therefore, we are only now *beginning* to develop telepathy, so that very primitive effects are sometimes barely detectable in some people.

I find that hard to accept. Even simple brains have thoughts that could be powerful and worth receiving. The predator sneaking up on his prey must be thinking, at the very least, the equivalent of “—food—food—food—”

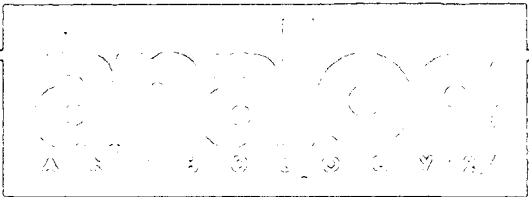
If the prey sees, hears, or smells the approaching predator, it is off at once; but surely that is not enough. The predator may be hidden, noiseless, and moving upwind. Would it not be useful for the prey to detect that “—food—” pulsing in the other brain?

I see a value to telepathy, an overriding survival value, that should have developed the ability in organisms with brains far too simple to develop complex ideas. We might as well argue that all animals but human beings should be deaf, since none of them have brains complex enough to be able to talk; or blind, since none of them have brains complex enough to be able to read. Hearing and sight have other, and more fundamental, functions than speaking and reading; and telepathy might well have other, and more fundamental, functions than carrying on an abstract conversation.

But maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps telepathy simply requires a more complex brain than sight and hearing do, and not all the need in the Universe will force it into existence until the brain reaches a certain pitch of development. That would be why we're just beginning to detect it in a few quite rudimentary cases.

If that is so, doesn't it make sense to suppose that it is likely to show up in people with particularly efficient and complex brains? Yes, I know there are “idiot savants” who can do amazing things, but if telepathy can develop in backward brains, we're instantly back to wondering why it didn't develop in the lower animals.

If telepathy requires advanced brains, it will show up in particularly intelligent, shrewd, forceful, charismatic individuals, it seems to me. What's more, it would surely give them, even if it is present in only rudimentary form, a powerful advantage over others.



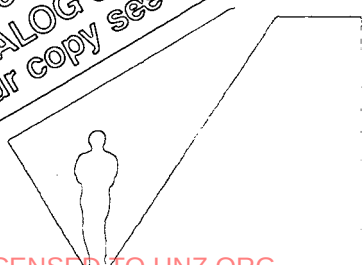
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Might it not be, then, that telepathic powers explain how the leaders in politics, business, religion, science, and so on, come to be leaders? Might it not be just the touch of telepathy that does it?

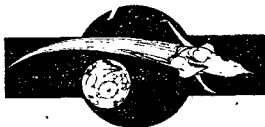
I might believe that were it not that the world's leaders in every field have always shown a perfectly human capacity to be fooled, deceived, and betrayed. Julius Caesar clearly didn't know what was in the mind of Brutus. Napoleon I surely did not suspect his foreign minister, Talleyrand, to be playing the role of double agent for years. Hitler certainly didn't suspect that a bomb had been planted a few feet from him on July 20, 1944.

In other words, whether we consider the situation from the standpoint of biology or history, we see a world which simply doesn't make sense if telepathy exists.

I therefore conclude that the odds are enormously against the existence of telepathy.

In order to make me believe that telepathy exists, despite the evidence of the world around me, I would need very strong evidence, together with fool-proof reasoning; and this simply doesn't exist.

All that the proponents of telepathy can offer are anecdotal evi-



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dence and the kind of statistical analysis of guessing games that Rhine used to present. In these things, the possibilities of lies, hoaxes, or just honest distortion and wishful thinking, are great enough to reduce it all to worthlessness in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the world we experience.

This is not to say that telepathy may not be possible some time in the future. Conceivably, something of the sort may yet evolve as brains become still more complex.

Much more likely, in my opinion, is the chance that we may learn how to amplify, analyze, and interpret brain waves to the point where we can "read minds" by instrument. I can even imagine people having combination amplifier/analyzers strapped unobtrusively behind the ear with fine leads attached to appropriate places on the skull, so that each person can broadcast his own thoughts and read those of others.

This, however, would be high-technology, and would not be the kind of telepathy that unsophisticated people ask me to "believe" in.

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DON'T YOU BELIEVE?

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

The Morphodite by M.A. Foster, DAW Books, \$2.75 (paper).
Sunwaifs by Sydney J. Van Scyoc, Berkley, \$2.25 (paper).
The Sword of the Lictor by Gene Wolfe, Timescape, \$13.95.
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Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Baird Searles, c/o The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, NY 10014.

The Morphodite, by M.A. Foster, got off to a bad start with me because of its title. It's an unpleasant word, *morphodite*, redolent of nasty little boys sniggering behind the barn, an ignorant corruption of a valid word, used to describe peers that don't meet their socially twisted idea of masculinity and femininity. But, says I, never judge a book by its title.

However, that novel that it's the title of, I'm sorry to say, is rather a dreary mess. Foster has some following based on several previous novels; from this one, I'm hard put to say why.

It's set on Oerlikon, described as a bland world, the single planet of an undistinguished star in a "desolate" region of space. Settled by a sect called The Changeless—whose name describes its philosophy—the reactionary, uniform society has vegetated along for over a millennium, losing all contact with the outside galaxy.

But at the point in time of the novel there are other forces working. There is a fragmented underground that desires change; and there is another underground, a large and tightly knit group of observers, integrated into the society, who are from other systems. Why

and for whom this enormous effort of spying on the totally boring society of Oerlikon is being made is not clear.

An official concerned with mind control has constructed a new type of human being who has two main talents. One is to be able to extrapolate the key person in a social matrix (almost never a prominent person) whose death will destroy that matrix; the other is the ability to change sex, a process accompanied by growing younger by some years and partial amnesia. (If all this is sounding pretty arbitrary to you, you're right.)

The official gives the morphodite, as this new-type human is called, to the revolutionary underground group on the theory that the morphodite (currently a mature male named Rael) is operating on false premises, can't do what he thinks he can do, and will create chaos among the revolutionaries. But he can and he does, and the person he chooses to do away with is, of course, one of the extra-Oerlikonian observers, which blows *their* cover, which brings down the society.

That's not all, by any means, but I can't really go on. The morphodite changes sex a couple of times; it takes a bit of doing to make that process uninteresting, but the author succeeds. And if the concepts seem arbitrary, the plot is even more so. Characters' actions and reactions, events and counter-events keep ringing false. All the people in this novel seem slightly mad because they keep doing things and reacting in ways that are not only unexpected, but illogical. But it's not an interesting madness—and certainly not a likable one; Foster seems to have a genius for creating unlikable characters. Part of this might be attributable to dialogue such as: "So come along now; never fear—I will not betray your direness, which hangs about you like a thundercloud." Could *you* warm up to someone who talked like that?

Curiously enough, I kept being reminded of Jack Vance's work, which contains similar rhetorical dialogue and plots and events that can be considered just as arbitrary. Even Foster's nomenclature—Anibal Glist, Arunda Palude—sounds adVanced. But Vance has that indefinable thing called style, and the madness and arbitrariness and portentous dialogue are interesting and amusing. Foster is the color-intoxicated Vance in black and white; if Vance is newly opened champagne, Foster is Cold Duck gone very flat.

If I'm going to be grumpy, I may as well keep going and get it out of the way at the beginning of this piece. Only one more grump, really; and after that we're in the clear, I promise. That one grump

is Sydney J. Van Scyoc's *Sunwaifs*. Ms. Van Scyoc also has several earlier novels that have been well-regarded; in the case of this most recent one, it's a splendid idea that seems to get bogged down.

Again we have a backwater planet, Destiny, colonized by humans but totally out of touch with other worlds. Its own ecology permits only the barest foothold for Earth's plants and stock, and so life is hard and after two centuries, the human society is small, crabbed, and puritanical. Into it, after a season of violent solar activity, are born six children, each a different sort of mutation. They seem destined (pun intended) to act as go-betweens, intercessors for humanity to Destiny—or perhaps vice versa.

Now I'd love a good meaty novel of a group of mutants at odds with a colonial society, yet eventually forging a link between it and its alien home; but *Sunwaifs* just doesn't measure up to its promising premise. The children, despite their varied talents (Herrol has strong rapport with the beasts, Trebb with the growing things, Ronna heals, etc.), never become individuals; they never come alive. Neither does the culture from which they spring. Destiny and its forces, on the other hand, may be too alive; matters get a little mushily mystical, and I couldn't tell where one of the children's personification of the planet's Earth and Sky left off and "reality" began.

Unless I was missing a lot (which, gentle readers, please bear in mind is always possible), this is one of those attempts at combining SF and fantasy, always a dangerous ambition, that just doesn't quite come off.

One that continues to do so, triumphantly, is Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*. Forecast for four volumes, the third, *The Sword of the Lictor*, is now available; I've spent so much time on the first two, *The Shadow of the Torturer* and *The Claw of the Conciliator*, that I'll only note that the quality is sustained, the invention miraculously keeps coming. And that at one point in the narrative, I was delighted to discover Wolfe paraphrasing, closely and cleverly, a classic of 19th-century fantasy I know and love well. I won't say what it is; them that knows it will know it, them that don't, won't.

Another area hard to bring off is whimsy. Very rarely successful—how many Poohs and Moomins are there?—it usually comes in one of two varieties: written for adults, but meant to touch the child in us (and usually suffering from terminal cutes), or written for children, most often harmless and forgettable but once in a pink moon working on a wildly humorous level for adults. There's a new



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one of each kind just published, and they are both grand.

A few months back I mentioned Joan Aiken's Alternate England series, the first three of which have just appeared in mass market paperback for the first time. There are two more, not available in that form but which I should have mentioned (*The Whispering Mountain*, *The Cuckoo Tree*) and now there is a sixth—sixth to be published, but fourth in interior chronology, titled *The Stolen Lake*.

It had been my impression that the alternate time stream in which this series took place diverged from ours some time in the 18th century, since the major difference seemed to be that the Stuarts had kept the British throne, and it was the Hanoverians who were the pretenders. But in *The Stolen Lake* we learn that the divergencies began a good deal earlier than that. It seems back in the 6th century that when the British-Roman forces lost the battle of Dyrham against the Saxons, they picked up and emigrated to the Andes, resulting in the damndest culture to appear in years, a sort of Welsh-Inca-Spanish amalgam. (And names such as Huascar Ccaedmon.)

It also results in an Arthurian spinoff so dizzy it makes *The Once and Future King* look like history. One of the countries resulting from the sixth-century settlement is New Cumbria; its queen, Ginevra, is indeed Guinevere, who has kept herself alive by various unsavory means waiting for Arthur to come back. The problem is that he has to come back across the same lake that his aunts spirited him away on, to Avalon. The British had anticipated this problem by bringing the lake with them in the form of frozen ballast and depositing it in a convenient hollow in the Andes, but now (the story takes place in the 19th century), the lake has been stolen, probably by King Mabon of Lyonesse, a next-door kingdom.

Into this off-the-wall situation comes a British warship, sent by James III in response to a plea for aid from Queen Ginevra. (Relations between Britain and Roman America have been good since the Saxons settled down.) And aboard is the London urchin, Dido Twite, on her way home from the whaling voyage for the Pink Whale chronicled in *Nightbirds on Nantucket*. Unutterable chaos results, flavored with appearances by Arthurian people, places, and things (the sword gets refound in the bed of the missing lake), and the king returns, from a most unlikely direction. I can't resist spilling the fact, even though it's part of the climax, that the wicked queen meets her end in a revolving door.

The right sort of children will find this all wonderfully exciting; so will the right sort of adults, with the addition of delighting in the high jinks of play with plot and history.

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Elizabeth Scarborough's *Song of Sorcery* (lousy title), on the other hand, was written for adults; I base this surmise on the fact that she deals with sex rather lightly—in an adult way, let's say, though hardly dwelling on it—and even the surprising juveniles of the day don't do that. But she uses the classic fantasy elements in a fairy-tale way rather than a heroic-fantasy way; we're in Thurber country here, though the novel has none of his fabulous (literally) sparseness.

It has a lot else, though: a fantasy kingdom with witches and fairies as well as humans, dragons, enchantments, gypsies, a quest or three, and minstrels. The hero, in fact, is a Journeyman Minstrel straight out of the Academy; he is impressed into a quest with the young witch, Maggie, for her half-sister Amberwine (*aka* Winnie) who has a lot of fairy blood on her maternal side (it's a complicated family), and who has very atypically deserted her husband and run off with a gypsy.

This quest gets transmuted for complicated reasons into several others; Maggie and the minstrel find themselves searching for Gypsy Davey's heart, which has been magically removed, and the sorcerer who's apparently at the center of all the confounding situations in which they keep finding themselves. On the way they encounter a lovelorn dragon, a moony unicorn appropriately named Moonshine, an ambitious siren who wants to transfer dirtside, a gypsy band as determinedly gypsyish as Ravel's *Tzigane* whose queen, of course, is named Xenobia, and places such as the Gulf of Gremlins and a river called the Troutroute. The current king of Argonia is Finbar the Fireproof, and Maggie's familiar is a cat called Chingachook.

This could be all pretty twee if the characters weren't so engaging and often fairly tart about the proceedings, especially Maggie and her familiar. Since Maggie's witch talent is hearthcraft (lighting fires and stretching the larder), and the best joke in the book is her Aunt Sybil's house, inherited from an ancestress who was fond of children in rather the wrong way, I think the word for *Song of Sorcery* is delicious.

Enough of novels; there are some odd corners of the current crop of books to explore for variety. And various is the word for one, a feast of poetry, short stories, plays, and exquisite drawings, all by one genius. That word is one I use sparingly to the point of not at all; but if there is one individual in the field of fantasy to whom it can be unhesitatingly applied, that one is Mervyn Peake. I have championed and treasured his work since the day in 1949 when I bought a remaindered copy of *Titus Groan* for 50¢. I'm happy these

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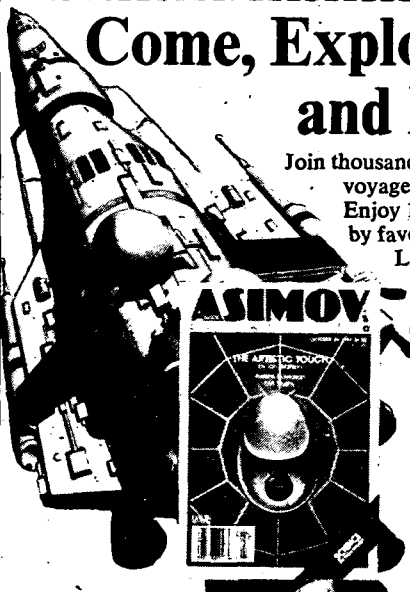
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“Could it be . . .?”

days that his genius is being recognized (too late, as always; he died in 1968).

Most people know Peake only through the towering and unique *Gormenghast* trilogy, and have no idea of his talents as poet and painter. A new book, *Peake's Progress*, edited by his widow, Maeve Gilmore, collects much of his shorter work in words (some previously unpublished) and a representative group of wondrous miscellaneous drawings.

Here are short stories, among them his first, "The White Chief of the Umzimbooboo Kaffirs," written when he was eleven, and the long-unavailable "Boy in Darkness," perhaps an episode in the life of Titus unchronicled in the trilogy. The poetry covers a wide spectrum, from the horrific "The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb," initially published in a volume by itself, to some delightful "rhymes without reason," such as "The Hippopotamus" ("The very nastiest grimace/You make upon the sly,/IS CHOICE beside the Hippo's face/WHO-DOESN'T EVEN TRY."). The miscellaneous writings include notes for a projected autobiography; a radio play based on Peake's little-known novel, *Mr. Pye*; a three-act verse drama for the stage entitled *The Wit To Woo*; and *Noah's Ark*, a play for children. Among the drawings are six of a ravishing set he did for *The Quest for Sita*, a retelling of the Ramayana; a wonderfully whacky half-dozen for his own "Moccus Poems," more nonsense verse; and illustrations for *Treasure Island*, *The Hunting of the Snark*, and *Bleak House*. The last two are particularly right, since there is a strong kinship to both Carroll and Dickens in Peake's writings.

In short, *Peake's Progress* is a treasure trove of wonderful things.

To close, two picture books that still have a healthy amount of text, and are curiously akin to each other. Both are non-fiction in form; both, in fact, natural history books. One is fact with an air of fantasy; one is fantasy with an air of fact.

It is a little unfair to review *The Dinosaurs* in this column, which deals with SF and fantasy, for the book is scrupulously factual. The text is accurate and readable, though it may tell you more about dinosaurs than you want to know (including a page on their defecation habits and their tendency toward constipation).

But the book is built around its pictures; they, also, are certainly accurate to the best of my knowledge, but presented so fancifully that they make an album of superb fantasy; this is a complex question of visual esthetics, but take my word for it. The artist, William Stout, has portrayed the saurians, fantastic to begin with in their

many outré varieties, against such dramatic and colorful backings, with such imaginative borders and decorations, that one expects Racquel Welch or Dian the Beautiful to turn up astride one. Two paintings in particular, one of a pterosaur soaring over a herd of alamosaur with the viewpoint from directly above, the other of two pteranodons flying in sunset clouds, are breathtaking. All credit to the production team—Mr. Stout, narrator William Service, and editor Byron Preiss—for this volume.

Much as I liked *The Dinosaurs*, however, I liked Dougal Dixon's *After Man* even more—what an extraordinary book! It is, at first glance, one of those zoological volumes handsomely illustrated with paintings and sketches that had their heyday in the 19th century (Audubon et al.), leaves from which are often sold separately for use, framed, as handsome wall decor.

The full-page paintings in *After Man* are as handsome and expertly done; the text is clear and informative and scientifically verisimilar. But the wide variety of animal life we are shown populates the Earth 50 million years after man has disappeared.

There are wonders on every page, and I want to tell you about them all, but it's much better to discover them for yourself. Just as examples, let me cite these charming upcoming beasties: the pfrit (*Aquambulus hirsutus*), a descendant of the shrews only five centimeters long, whose broad feet, covered with water-repellent hair, enable it to "skate" on water; the falanx (*Amphimorphodus cynomorphus*), long-legged, dog-sized rats which hunt in packs; and the swimming monkey (*Natopithecus ranapes*), an amphibious primate. Those are milder specimens; there are many species so outlandish they are indescribable without pictorial aid. However outlandish, though, they are always credible, and no more unlikely than the whale, the giraffe, and the panda.

After Man is a extrapolative tour de force. If you get only one book for your coffee table this year, it should be this one. Stand warned, though: your guests will not only be impressed; you may not be able to get it away from them.

And, as ever, to close, new books done in one way or another by folks connected with this publication. This time—*On Writing Science Fiction* by George H. Scithers, Darrell Schweitzer and John M. Ford; and *The Hand of Zei* by L. Sprague de Camp, and illustrated by Edd Cartier.

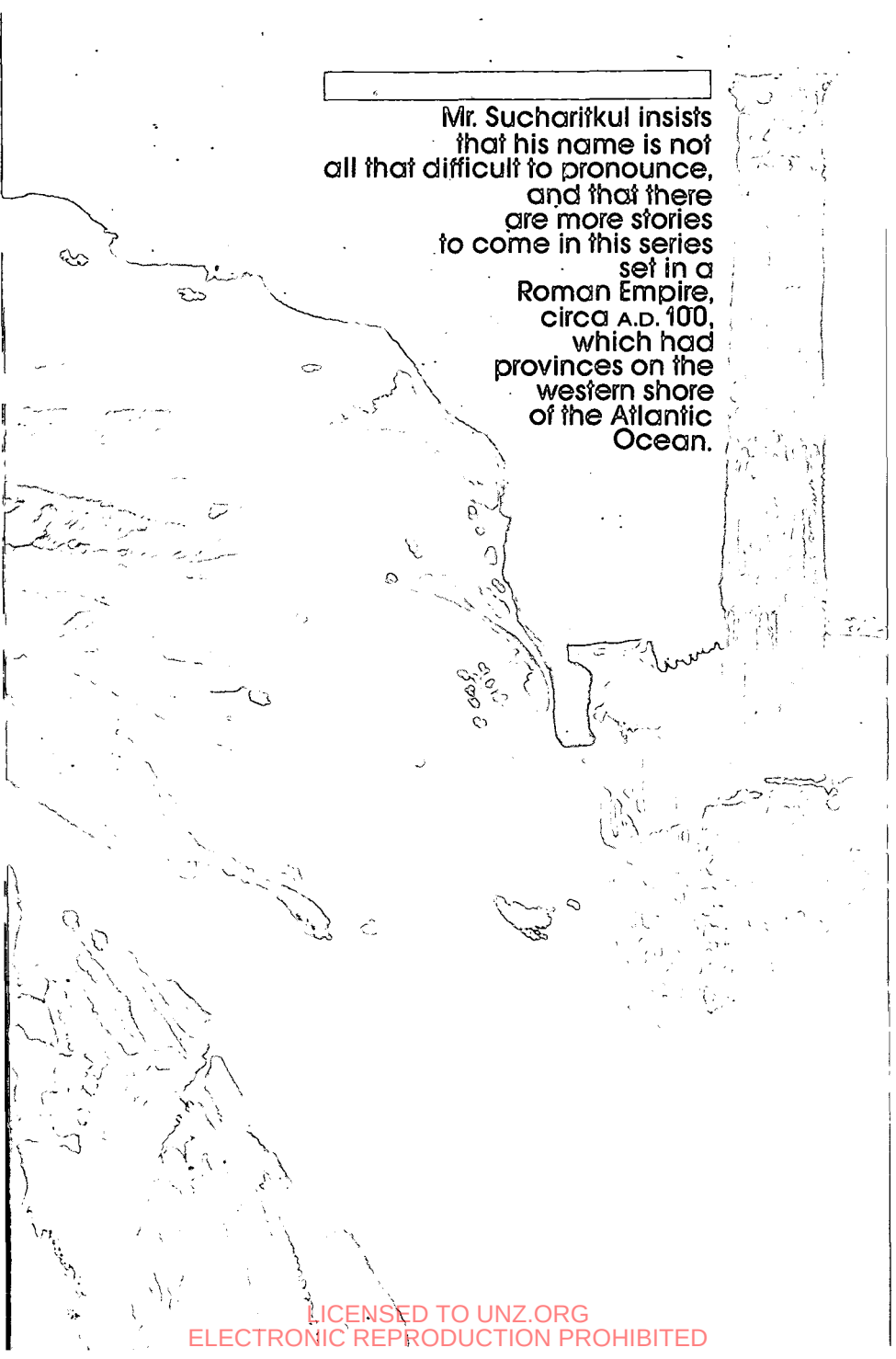
AQUILA THE GOD

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: Val Lakey/Artifact



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Mr. Sucharitkul insists
that his name is not
all that difficult to pronounce,
and that there
are more stories
to come in this series
set in a
Roman Empire,
circa A.D. 100,
which had
provinces on the
western shore
of the Atlantic
Ocean.

As soon as I arrived in Terra Nova as the Emperor Domitian's newly appointed procurator of the province of Lacotia, I made all the usual decrees: renovating the procurator's palace at Caesarea-on-Miserabilis; engaging the impresario Lucretius Lupus to provide sufficiently astounding beasts and gladiators for the weeklong games in my own honor; and sending parties of surveyors to check up on the aqueducts, temples, and other public works that my predecessors had created.

In my time I had travelled most of the Roman world—I had been as tourist to Egypt and Hispania, and as Dux of the Thirty-Fourth Legion to Dacia and as far east as Cappadocia, where I had had a run-in with the Parthians. But I was unprepared for Terra Nova. They had warned me that the place was at least as huge as the rest of the Empire. That the two provinces under our control, Iracuavia and Lacotia, were as vast as Europe, wild and impenetrable, and swarming with savages of a thousand kinds and languages. I heard of the mighty Miserabilis, a river longer than the Nile; of the Montes Saxosi, mountains at the Empire's limits that dwarfed the Alps and the Caucasus. But none of the stories,—and not even my prior acquaintance of a tribe of Lacotii, who had helped me in my struggle with the Parthians—was as astonishing as the reality. It was the little details that were most alien: the strutting, giant chickens; the skin-tent villages; the feathered countenances of my new subjects. And the distances; for it took me almost three months, even with the advanced new ships, to reach the port of Eboracum Novum, and then many months of overland and upriver travel to reach the realm I was to rule.

I have told of my official acts on reaching Caesarea, a jewel of a little city, nice Roman temples and insulae and fora and agorae and a little amphitheater and racecourse, nestled in a fork of the River Miserabilis, a comforting chunk of Rome in the midst of unending plains dotted here and there with clusters of tipis and vast herds of aurochs. My first private act was to have a marble statue of Aquila made, and to install it in an atrium of my palace.

For Aquila, the barbarian, chieftain of the Tetonii tribe of Lacotians and the Emperor's favorite, was responsible for my being in this forsaken wilderness. Oh, he didn't mean anything by it, I'm sure. And a great deal of it was simply Domitian's annual purge of the up-and-coming. But here I was, and he was in Rome, no doubt enjoying all the things I couldn't have: peacocks' brains! raw unborn dormice dipped in honey! and the wine, the good Greek wine that cost a whole aureus here for a single jug.

Each day, as I sat in the procurator's seat and signed documents or pronounced judgments, I would be looking straight at the statue's face. I'd made sure the sculptor made it quite unflattering; the beak of a nose, the coronet of scraggly eagle feathers, the unkempt, stringy hair, the stooped shoulders, and the smirky expression: all had been very accurately displayed. When particularly frustrated I would pelt it with rotten fruits.

Indeed, I was doing just that one fateful morning, when I found out just how devious, relentless, and unmitigated Domitian's dislike for me really was.

I was on a couch by the fountain, having my morning Lacotian lesson. In every other land of the Empire we had established Latin or Greek as the lingua franca, but not here; we had been beaten to it by a system of peculiar hand-signals and gestures with which all the savages, no matter which barbarous tongue they used, could communicate. My boyhood tutor Nikias, a sexagenarian by now, who had preceded me into Lacotia, had made it his life's task to study the dialects of Lacotia and to compile a monstrous Lacotian-Greek Lexicon. It was easier to learn from him than from some savage; and so, though it was almost forty years since I'd sat on his knee and recited my *alpha beta gamma*, it was as though nothing had changed.

"No, master Titus," he was saying, pointing at the scroll on which I had been laboriously trying to translate Virgil from Latin into Lacotian using the Greek-letter transcription system Nikias had devised (for the Lacotian savages wrote only in pictures before our coming). "Not at all. You see, here you've written *mit'awichu* for 'my wife' and *mit'achink'shi* for 'my son.' But you see, 'son' takes the *intrinsic* possessive, so that should just be *michink'shi*. The *extrinsic* possessive is used for alienable or distant possessions, such as a wife who might after all be divorced, whereas a son—"

"Jove blast these Lacotians!" I said. "Why can't they have simple declensions and conjugations, like civilized languages? So we do have six hundred different endings in Latin, but at least we bloody well know what the word's doing in the sentence! None of this *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* possession . . . oh, I'd give anything for a good old irregular Greek contracted verb. Well, I suppose you might as well finish correcting the paragraph. . . ."

"Well, actually the rest of the sentence is wrong too. You see, when 'thou' is the subject and 'them' the object, the two pronouns are replaced by the prefix *wichaya-* and for the plural you must add *-pi* to form *wichayak'tepi*, 'you (plural) kill them,' but then—"

"Curse it! How did *you* ever learn all this nonsense?"

"I was a slave once, master Titus. Slaves learn very quickly, or else end up as spectacle-fodder for the circus."

I sighed. The sun was rising over the Temple of Augustus. I cursed at the statue of Aquila, smug and smarmy in his war-bonnet and toga. Damn them all! "Just *one* goblet of Chian wine, that's all I want. Half a goblet."

"First you have to hold court a while, my lord; then I'll go down to the steward's and see whether there is any."

"There isn't. I drank the dregs yesterday." I stood up and shook my toga straight. "Any good court cases?"

"Nothing; just a run-of-the-mill crucifixion or two, and oh, a raid on the southern town of Cansapolis by the wild Apaxian tribes beyond the border. A delegation of the Cansae are here to ask for help."

"Oh good, I'll be able to practise my Lacotian on them."

"Wrong dialect, I'm afraid. Related, I think, but not mutually comprehensible."

"Damn these Lacotians and their squabbling tribes and their countless languages."

"If you say so, my lord."

I hefted half a pumpkin at Aquila's face.

Just at that moment all hell broke loose outside the palace. Hoofbeats thudded. Shields and weapons clanked. "Oh no," I said, "not another coup-counting expedition!"

Tubae blared. Slaves scurried in and started swabbing at Aquila with mops. "Visitors," said Nikias. Gathering my dignity as my body-slave handed me my vestments of office, I ascended the steps to my procurator's seat. The riders were near now. Suddenly slaves and officials were scuttling in at the main entry to the atrium, scattering in the wake of the mounted messengers, while the trumpets barked raggedly and out of tune. "Those savages!" I cried. "They ride into one's very house. Nikias, have them executed or flogged or something on their way out."

They dismounted.

I recognized four Praetorians in spanking new uniforms. A pretty, over-dressed page bearing a scroll on a silver platter. And behind them—in the toga praetexta of a senator yet—an ancient man with a beak for a nose, wearing a ridiculous headpiece that was a tasteless mismatch of golden laurel wreath and eagle-feather war-bonnet.

"Aquila!" I shouted.

"I see you've been getting good use out of my statue, my dear General Titus," he said, approaching my throne, and curiously eye-

ing the slaves as they scrubbed at the still pumpkinified nose of the marble image.

"What's it to you?" I snapped. Then emotion overcame me. "Oh, Aquila . . . I've been so miserable here!" I had missed him terribly, and had never had the guts to admit it to myself. I got off my throne and went down to embrace him. "My friend! Has the Emperor recalled me? Perhaps he's dead and one of my friends is on the throne?"

"Come, come, stiff upper lip and all that, you know," he said.

"A year in Rome and you talk just like my father," I said, and he shrugged.

"To business, Titus; and I think you'd better get back on that official chair of yours—"

"You dare to command—" I stopped. He picked up a purple-bordered fold of his senatorial toga and whisked it in my face.

"I'm not a savage, you know. In fact, the Emperor has made me next in line to the procuratorship—although I've frankly declined the honor. Sooner or later one gets purged, I found."

I climbed back on my throne. I was now the voice of the Senate and People of Rome; that is to say, Caesar's mouthpiece. I put on a good menacing mien as befitted my role.

"There's a good lad." I pretended to ignore his patronizing tone. In spite of my five minutes of enthusiasm, I was already wishing the uppity savage into a nice hot niche in Hades. Then Aquila came forward and placed an object in my hand, cool and smooth. I looked at it.

"Strange," I said. It was a statuette, carved in jade, only a few fingers tall, but worked in lavish detail. It was a baby—no sex could be distinguished—caught in the middle of some supernatural transformation, for parts of its face and body were shifting into those of some feral cat-creature, leopard or tiger perhaps. It was not exactly beautiful; any Greek craftsman would have inveighed at length about its lack of proportion, its complete disregard of natural human posture. The expression was what held me: it was both anguished and joyful, unhuman. I knew it as the face of some god.

"What is it?" I said.

Aquila said, "It came to Rome with Trajan's triumph, one of the many spoils of the campaign against the Seminoles and the Chirochian Confederation. Caesar was so captivated with it that for weeks he stared all day at it, neglecting the government, not even participating in the customary banquets and orgies."

Looking at the statuette, I understood. "But what culture has fashioned this thing? The only jade-works I have ever seen have

come from the distant east, down the silk route from the empire of the yellow folk which no one has ever seen; but this workmanship is different from theirs. And this is no god I've ever heard of."

"General Titus, the Word of Caesar!" Aquila said. Tubae brayed resoundingly, and the silver platter with the scroll on it was presented to me.

This is what I read:

To Titus Papinianus, Procurator of Lacotia, from the Divine Domitian, greeting.

Titus old boy!

Thought you'd got out of my hair, did you? Thought I'd never bother you again, eh, out there in the middle of the wilderness with nothing but barbarians for company? Well, you thought wrong, I'm afraid. My famous sense of humor prompts me to issue new commands.

I have a new favorite at court, Leukippos son of the philosopher Epaminondas whose visions created the motor-car and the quick-sailing-ship. He is one of those scientists, you know. He's recalculated the old figures of that ancient Eratosthenes, and has decided that Eratosthenes's estimate of the circumference of the earth is wrong by some vast factor. The upshot of it all is this . . . that the fabled Middle Empire, called by the Hindish traders Chin or China, ought to lie somewhere within the great continent of Terra Nova. This statuette—which I can hardly bear to part with—is further proof, since everyone knows that only the Chinish peoples have the art of carving jade.

Well, can you guess yet, my dear Titus, how I plan to bring about your downfall? Yes indeed! I want more of these things. I want that Kingdom discovered at once. In time we'll send a real general, someone competent like Trajan, to do the actual conquering, but in the meantime I want you to explore beyond the Empire's borders until you find this Chinish Empire. A small party will do very nicely, nothing fancy, since I have no intention of paying for this out of the royal coffers when the mob outside is howling for more bread and more spectacles!

I'll expect some kind of report, Titus Papinianus. And beware—I've my eye on you. I still haven't forgotten what your father did to poor old Nero.

Good Luck,

Titus Flavius Domitianus, Caesar, Augustus, God-Emperor of the Universe, Pater Patriae, Pater Maximus Candidusque, et cetera, et cetera.

"Good heavens, Aquila," I said, passing the letter on to Nikias.

"This is absurd!" Nikias said. "Eratosthenes's figures are clearly impeccable, measuring as he did the parallax of the sun's shadow in two different locations in Egypt. And besides, the extra space is necessary. After all, where does the sun go when its chariot comes to rest at the day's end? Where do all the deities of the world live, and where are the thousands of heavens and hells, if not in the 'lost' spaces?"

"And," I added, "this simply is *not* a Chinish piece of artwork. I'd wager twenty talents on it. Domitian's gone mad!"

"Alas, Titus, I wish I could agree with you," said Aquila. "But I happen to know that this whole thing is simply a rather imaginative, roundabout way of getting you on the purge list. You see, simple executions and things have gone out of style in Rome. Indeed, I was there at the very banquet when Domitian and Leukippos (who, I'm afraid, shares the Emperor's bed as well as his confidences) concocted this elaborate scientific hokum while downing endless bucketfuls of Chian wine."

I was furious. "It rankles," I said, "especially the Chian wine. *Onze mayahu kte lo!*" I added (it was the one obscenity I knew), hoping to impress Aquila with my new grasp of the Lacotian tongue.

Instead, he and Nikias laughed uproariously. "I suppose I shouldn't make fun of you, general," said Aquila, but you just told me that I am about to perform an unspeakable act upon your inviolate person."

"Oh, sorry. Wrong pronoun again, eh?" I said. "I intended to say that *I* would perform this act on the emperor."

"Yes, you should have used the nominative *wa-* prefix. But seriously, it was then that I knew Domitian planned to do away with you and play a fiendish joke besides. That's why I insisted on bringing you the message myself, all the while pretending to laugh myself silly over Caesar's brilliant wit. You see, I'm the only person who can possibly help you solve the riddle of the jade statuette. Besides, Rome was beginning to bore me. The decadence! You've seen one orgy, you've seen them all. And the Lacotian tribesmen who settled in Cappadocia—dissipated, every one of them. Gone to boozing and orgiifying. Some of them have taken up in the arena, where they even perform the sundance nowadays, although it goes against all I believe in. I'm bitter, Titus. I'll come with you on your quest for Caesar's golden fleece."

"But you said you knew—"

"Perhaps so. It's a legend, nothing more. Of a race far far to the south, who worship the were-jaguar and carve mysterious heads.

For all I know they may have died out.”

“And their name?”

“I don’t know what they call themselves. But the Apaxians of the desert talk sometimes of an ancient empire-building race they call the Olmechii. . . .”

In a few days we set off down the great Miserabilis River by paddleboat. I was proud of this new acquisition: Epaminondas of Alexandria, who perfected the steam engine and had since been executed for refusing to give up its secrets, originally created such a barge for Nero’s state visit to Egypt, so that Caesar could journey down the Nile in style. It was occasionally powered by steam; more often, the huge paddle was kept in constant motion by an assemblage of treadmill-jogging slaves. They were lazy, shiftless good-for-nothings, captured from the Algonquian and Athapascan tribes of the icy north, less civilized even than our somewhat Romanized Lacotians.

It was an idle month. I and Nikias and Aquila would sit in our couches of state; an elegant little temple to Minerva graced one end of the boat, while the prow was carved to resemble a Naiad in a somewhat pornographic pose, and inlaid with several talents of solid gold. The trappings were as luxurious as in Rome; the food and drink were not, and for some weeks we ate nothing but aurochs: stewed, boiled, roasted, fried, but never once metamorphosing into some more palatable creature. Aquila disgusted me by frequently eating the liver raw; even as a senator he had not given up all his filthy barbarian ways.

Aside from the paddle slaves, of which a certain number expired daily and had to be replaced, we had brought few attendants. There were about a dozen guards, mostly of the tribe of Tetonii, in their half-Roman, half-barbarous garb; and the usual consortium of body-slaves, cooks, scullery-maids, bed-wenchs, foot-washers, masseurs, singers, lyre-players, dancers, Nubian palanquin-bearers, toga-stitchers, pot-washers, and so on: only a few score of these, hardly enough to call a decent household, but then Lacotia was still something of a hardship post. An escort of charioteers rode alongside, and we had horses below deck.

Lacotia went by slowly—for it is a vast terrain—and we soon grew weary of endless plains. Here and there stood a little shrine to Caesar, whom the natives had graciously been permitted to worship under the aspects of their own rather nebulous god Vacantanca, a god whose vagueness is equalled only by the formless thing the

Judaeans worship. Or we would pass a little tipi-cluster from which smoke curled into the brilliant blue sky. Or a Roman town, an islet of marble in the great green grassy ocean. It was a beautiful land, but I wished we would get on with it. I had the slaves lashed harder, but nothing came of it.

Soon we went by the last frontier fort. We encountered rough waters where the River Ochaio runs into the Miserabilis. Now we were in enemy lands. We had catapultae and ballistae aplenty on board, and I set the Lacotian centurions to constant watching. On the right bank was Caddonian, on the left Muschogea; so the first explorers had named these lands, after the principal languages the savages spoke. But we knew little about them, and the names were meaningless to me.

For a week or so we continued downriver. We ate dried aurochs now, salty and tough to chew, and a little river-fish. We watched the dancing girls and talked of old times, and at night I stared at the Olmechian figurine, trying to divine its secrets.

One day we were eating breakfast on deck. I was just stuffing my mouth with a chunk of aurochs when I heard a zinging, whistling sound. I stared incredulously as an arrow pierced the meat, flew into the temple of Minerva, and nailed my breakfast to the goddess' nipple.

"Whaa—" I said.

"Hostiles riding alongside boat, General, Sir!" said a centurion. "They've killed half the chariot escort—"

"Despatch them, for heaven's sake! I can't have my breakfast ruined, you know."

"Duck, Titus!" I heard Nikias shout. As I did so arrows began to rain on us from both sides.

"Get the catapultae out!" I screamed. "Lash the paddle-slaves, maybe we can outmaneuver them!" As I looked up I saw the slave-whipper clutch at the arrow in his throat and tumble from the treadmill. The slaves, who were chained and couldn't escape, were screeching with terror.

"China, my arse!" I cried. "We're not even going to get out of Lacotia alive!" Then I ran into the temple of Minerva and bolted the door. I found Nikias there already, hugging the altar in supplication, whilst Aquila was waving his arms and doing some hoppity-skippity dance while singing in a wheezy monotone. "Aquila, do something! You're the bloody expert on the savages."

"I *am* doing something," he said, and continued his dance. "This war-dance happens to be excellent medicine, and will render the



three of us quite invisible to the Apaxae."

"Apaxae—?"

"Yes," he said, not missing a beat of his dance. "They are the hardest of all the tribes; I am not surprised to see them comeraiding this far, for they often venture even into Roman-occupied territory. Now, if you'll excuse me . . . *hey-a-a-a hey-a-a! Eya-heya-ey-ey-ey-a-à! . . . let me see . . . eya-hey-hey-heya—*"

I gave up on him. Behind the goddess there was a window; I looked out and saw them.

There were several dozen. They were riding up and down the riverbank, whooping and taunting us. Their flowing black hair, held in place by headbands of old rags, streamed behind them. They were the scruffiest savages I'd yet seen, and the fiercest-looking.

Aquila stopped dancing. "*Huka hey!*" he shouted. "Let's attack them!"

"But the war-machines—"

He threw open the door of the temple. The Lacotian guards were letting the horses out from below decks; they were whinnying and rearing. Above the gleaming cuirasses and blood-red cloaks, their

faces gleamed with war-paint and their heads were crowned with feathers.

"*Huka hey!*" they screamed in unison. The Apaxians were charging straight into the water at our paddleboat, pelting us with arrows.

"Catapultae!" I shouted, grabbing a bucina from an astonished slave and blowing on it myself. The engines were wheeled into position. Great rocks soared and brained one or two of the Apaxian horses. They were diving into the water now, one after another, knives in mouths. I ordered the boarding-ramps lowered. The Lacotians' horses leaped overboard and they were fighting hand-to-hand, half in, half out of the water. Meanwhile Aquila had mounted himself and was rushing straight at the Apaxians, who never seemed to notice him.

"If an eighty-year-old man can do that—" I said to myself. Soon I too was calling for my horse. The temple of Minerva was on fire and so was the paddle-treadmill, and lines of slaves with buckets were busy quenching the flames. I jumped the side of the boat and rode down the ramp, cursing Domitian with a will.

"Quick!" I shouted at the last of the on-shore escort. "Put all the chariots in a circle!" One of them heard and relayed the order. In a while we were driving the Apaxae back over the river and right into the circle of chariots. The carnage was incredible, for these savages fought as if insensible to pain.

After some hard fighting we drove them off. The Lacotians scattered to strip and scalp the corpses. In the distance, a shout went up. Two Lacotians on horseback were returning, pursuing a man on a bicycle.

"Good heavens!" I said. "I haven't seem one of *those* since Rome—and Domitian wrecked almost all the bicycles in the world in an epic spectacle in the arena ten years ago!"

They had knocked off the bicycler, pinned him to the ground and were about to scalp him when I rode up to investigate.

"Let go!" a voice was squealing in Greek. "You can't do this to me, I'm a Roman citizen! You don't speak Greek? What about Latin? Sum civis Romanus! *Romanus*, d'ye hear, sum . . . civis . . . *Romanus!*"

"Release him," I said.

The man got to his feet. He was middle-aged, clad in a torn, dirt-streaked tunic of good Greek wool, but he had a decidedly dusky complexion, and his Greek was strangely accented. Once before had I heard such an accent . . . "Jove help us!" I said. "You're an Egyptian! Whatever are you doing here among these barbarians?"

He brushed himself with his hand. Then he said squeakily, "I was captured. They were going to torture me to death! Please help me, help me, I'm on a mission from the library of Alexandria, and—"

"That seems unlikely," I said, "considering that library was burnt down a century ago."

"No, no," he said, like a tutor addressing a stupid child, "not that Alexandria. Alexandria in Iracuavia! You know, Terra Nova's center of learning, dedicated to humanizing the savages! What are *you* doing here, anyway?" he added sulkily.

"How dare you use that tone to me? I am Titus Papinianus, procurator of Lacotia."

"Well, how was I to know? Procurators come and go; the turnover is amazing, what with purgings, recallings, treason-trials, and compulsory suicides. Never even heard of *you*. Wouldn't know you from Amenemhet!"

Just then Aquila and Nikias came riding up. They were jabbering away to each other in Lacotian, much to my chagrin. Then Nikias saw the Egyptian and exclaimed, "Well, if it isn't grumpy old Aaye!"

"Nikias! Why this is—this is—" He was overcome. Nikias got off his horse and they hugged each other, weeping.

"My lord," Nikias said to me, "this is the most bad-tempered scholar the world has ever known, the astrologer whose full name we could never pronounce at the Academy; but he answers to Aaye. We studied together before my unfortunate enslavement."

"What a coincidence! But what's a scholar like you doing far from civilization, being captured by savages?"

"You Roman pseudo-intellectuals are all alike," he grunted. "Always afraid you'll soil your delicate fingers, never leaving your slave-ridden palaces to quest for the hidden meanings to be found in the backwaters and cloacae of existence! But *I* am a true philosopher. I search for truth. At the moment, though, I'm searching for the pyramids."

I laughed. "The pyramids? In Terra Nova? I've heard of people losing their way, but this is ridiculous! You're out of your mind!"

"Perhaps so, though it's impertinent of you to point it out," he said. "But there is a scrap of parchment in the library—dating, it seems, from the first explorations of this continent—that mentions pyramids. Somewhere to the south. At least, I took it to mean that. Literally. They all laughed at me. How they laughed! Those rationalizing scholars with their theories of hallucination, symbolism, or some explorer's bout with a jug of bad Fallernian wine. If it doesn't warp to fit their theory they'll ignore it or ridicule it . . . not me! I

propound the scientific method. If it was good enough for Aristotle, it's good enough for me."

"But how did you come to be among the Apaxae?"

"Patience, Roman! We Egyptians have been civilized for four thousand years. We were building the pyramids when you were coming down from the trees. That's why you're all so damned impatient. Well . . . I journeyed here after learning a little of the Apaxian speech from one of my slaves, hoping to get corroboration for the parchment at the library. I lived among them for some months—no luxury at all, let me tell you!—when the village was raided by a rival tribe. They intended to trade my bicycle for some horses, and to kill me by some fiendish means; but as they journeyed towards their trading-rendezvous they chanced upon your paddleboat, and, thinking of the booty on board—"

"Enough of this longwindedness! We are travelling south at the Emperor's behest, on a wild goose chase as preposterous as your own. You can come with us if you choose; if not, there's not much I can do for you."

"How dare you call it a wild goose chase! I had already found evidence, before wicked fate cast me into this predicament—"

"Evidence?" I snorted.

"Yes! For when I inquired among the Apaxae about pyramids, when I drew them in the dirt to illustrate my meaning precisely, I would often elicit a certain response. It was a single word—foreign to their tongue—that appears to be the name of a race of pyramid-builders. . . ."

"And that name?" Aquila said. I noticed that he had leaned forward suddenly, and seemed to be taking this fool seriously.

"*Olmec*."

We reached the delta of the *Miserabilis* without much more incident; for the local natives, who were by no means Apaxian and lived in as much fear of their ravaging hordes as we did, were friendly, and we were often able to get food from them in exchange for a few of those valueless, heavy old copper coins that are still in vogue in Egypt and carry the images of the long-gone Ptolemaic dynasty. It was lush country, rich in fruits and meats. When we reached the sea, we had no idea what to do next.

Aye to the rescue, then. Faded old maps hastily copied from the Alexandria library documents were pulled out and pored over. They showed the seashore curving to the west; the words *terra incognita* were everywhere evident. I ordered a fort built on the left bank of

the Miserabilis; stocked it with catapultae and other artillery from the ship; and left most of the slaves there under guard, while Nikias, Aquila, Aaye and I rode southwards with only a handful of cavalry, Lacotian and Roman, and two weeks' supply of that hideous buffalo jerky.

Two weeks! We were very optimistic then; no one dreamed that the world could be quite as large as we came to discover. In any case, we followed the coastline at first, coming to the mouths of many rivers. After a fortnight we began to go through harsh terrain. The heat was stifling; and we had little water. To my surprise, Aaye proved the most stalwart of us here in the desert. I supposed it was because the Nile is a mere ribbon of greenery in the midst of a vast ocean of hot sand, and that the Egyptians have perforce learnt some of the ways of deserts. He had apparently learnt something from the Apaxae, too. How to trap and kill those alarming serpents with rattling tails, and how to suck the juices from the prickly, clublike vegetation. . . .

The worst was yet to come, though. I thought I had seen forests . . . I was not prepared for what came next. You could have sworn this forest was alive. It was dark, wet, swarming with vermin; snakes masqueraded as vines, alligators as logs, and mosquitoes bit our skin raw.

"Wherever we are," I sighed, "this certainly isn't China!"

"Clearly not," Aaye agreed. Then, settling into his pedagogic tone, he said, "For it is a well-established fact that the Chinish lands are full of golden towers and ziggurats, and that silken tapestries hang from every home. Indeed, I have heard it mentioned by Apollodorus the Bithynian, that the Chinish silk is manufactured by a giant worm, seven leagues long, that continually runs in a circle, eating its own tail, and that the effluence of saliva that drools from its maws, hardening in the path of its circumperambulatory meanderings, forms the thread used in the warp of the silk; for the woof, however, the Chinish sages entrap moonbeams by midnight and—"

"Rubbish!" Nikias said. "Aaye old chap, you were always the most gullible boy in the academy. If some two-obol authority had told you that the oceans on the moon's surface were deserts you would have believed it."

"You bastard! You stole master Harpocrates's apple and I got the strap for it! How dare you—"

"Enough, you fools!" I said. "Look at Aquila; he never argues with anyone, and he's borne all these hardships better than any of us."

We had found a little clearing. Bones and the remains of fires

littered the forest floor; it was our first evidence of humans. They were likely as not to kill us, but at that point I would rather have died at the hands of recognizable people than be torn to death by beasts like a criminal in the arena.

"And to think," Aquila said, as he tethered our horses (some had succumbed to horrid diseases, and these we had eaten, much to the discomfiture of our bowels), "that I did this all for you! Those deadly boring orgies at the palace are beginning to sound more and more attractive by the hour!"

The Lacotians were pitching a tipi and spreading aurochs hides on the ground to sleep on. If we fumigated it thoroughly with incense, and sealed the thing completely shut, the mosquitoes only bit one an average of once a minute instead of continuously.

Drinking the vile water had given me a flux; so I spent the day groaning in the tipi while Nikias read to me from a stack of the latest *scientiae fictiones*, which Aquila had had copied in Rome and had been kind enough to bring me: in particular a collection of pieces in the avant-garde style that characterizes all the decadent literary efforts of Domitian's reign, entitled *Visūs Periculosi*. While I found none of the visions particularly dangerous, especially in view of the actual horrors that surrounded me, I was amused by the frantic blandishments of Alienus Elysianus, the scribe who had anthologized and annotated the various scrolls.

"Reading that rubbish again!" said Aquila. "You should be working on your Lacotian grammar."

"And what of it?" I spluttered, gripping my bowels. "Why don't you do something useful?"

"I intend to! I am going hunting."

"What?"

"A brave can't laze around all day. Lack of action ages a man. I shall go stalk some creature for our supper." So saying, he took his quiver and a dagger and a sackful of skinning tools, and he strode out. Knowing the mosquito problem, I didn't care to follow.

Presently, though, a bloodcurdling scream cut across the jungle's cacophony of buzzings, croakings, and screechings.

"Jove help us!" I cried. "If it's Aquila, what'll we do?" I roused some of the others and we crept out, hacking at the undergrowth with our short swords.

"Aquila!" we called, our voices facing into the gloom. It suddenly occurred to me that we were lost, hopelessly lost, and even if we weren't lost we weren't going to get home anyway—

When I heard a familiar hooting sound, such as the Lacotians

used as a secret signal in warfare.

"Come out of there, by Hades!" I said. "I'm in no mood for another trick, this dysenterial flux is killing me, and—"

The hooting again.

"It's coming from the left," Nikias whispered.

"The right," hissed Aaye.

I listened. "The left." We tiptoed further into the darkness.

Now from the right. We passed huge trees, greater than the columns of the temples at Karnak, twined with vines. No light fell at all in the depths of this alien forest.

Then—

"I see light," I said.

"Ahead," said one of the Lacotians.

I took another step.

Something tightened around my foot! I was jerked up into the air. I saw my companions dangling head downwards from trees on either side, and so was I, and my helmet clanked onto the ground and the jade figurine that I had kept on my person all these months fell down beside it—

And then there were torches, blazing, blinding. Brown-skinned, lithe-looking natives had rushed to pick up the jade statuette, and were fingering it reverently.

"What the hell is going on?" I yelled. For in the center of the clearing ahead stood Aquila, large as life, his head thrown back in laughter; and all around him on the forest floor, prostrated in obeisance, were dozens of natives in elaborate costumes. And right at his feet was the corpse of a huge and frightening creature, the leopard-like demon that I had heard Aquila call *jaguar*.

"Tell them to let us down!"

Aquila said, "How can I? I've no idea what's going on, although it's about time a high chieftain of the Lacotians got treated with the proper respect. Why shouldn't I let you Romans hang for a few days, like pheasants ripening for the oven?"

We began to yell imprecations in every conceivable language. Finally one of the savages came and cut us down, after which we were led, with our hands tied behind our backs, to Aquila's feet and forced to make the prostration also.

"This is shameful!" I said. "That a Roman and an equestrian by rank, and a procurator at that, should be compelled to kneel down before some . . . some . . ."

"Now you know how we lowly savages feel, o noble procurator! But to be frank, I'm as much in the dark as you are. I just went out

and happened to kill this jaguar."

"With your bare hands?" I gasped.

He chuckled. "We Lacota have always been excellent hunters—although I did cheat a bit. I made friends with him first, by pulling a thorn out of his foot. Now, if someone would care to translate—"

One of the natives—whose earrings, I saw now, were enormous sun-disks of solid gold—came up and began barking, bellowing and braying in various languages.

"Ah!" Aaye said at last. "One I know. This one speaks Apaxian!"

So our interchanges began. Their leader spoke in whatever language it was (and I had a feeling it wasn't Chinish); their interpreter translated into Apaxian; Aaye relayed in Greek with a sprinkle of Latin and an occasional Egyptian curse; and finally Aquila repeated the exchange in the Tetonian dialect of Lacotian for the benefit of the native centurions who were also swinging by their feet. In this laborious way we spent the better part of a night; mercifully the need to discharge my flux did not visit me as yet.

Yes indeed, these people knew of the Olmechii, although they themselves were only a subject race. Aquila, who had killed the jaguar, had unwittingly become the victor of their regular competition for the rank of God-of-the-Month, and would soon be going in triumph to his coronation.

We mere mortals, on the other hand, would be sacrificed to the glory of Aquila and the entity He represented, the Great and All-powerful Flying Disk of the Sun. . . .

Indeed, I, whom the Great Were-Jaguar in the Sky himself had chosen by causing his image to appear beneath me as I dangled, was to have the honor of being the first to be sacrificed to Aquila the God . . . and all this by the charming expedient of ripping my still-beating heart from my chest with a crude obsidian knife.

"Delighted, I'm sure," I said. "At least it's a nice, simple death; none of Domitian's labyrinthine jokes."

"It's good to look on the bright side," Aquila agreed, as the flayed skin of the newly-killed beast was placed over his shoulders and a palanquin brought in to receive him, and as two of the natives stooped down for him to step up on their backs. "At last my dream has come true," he went on as eight burly, oiled natives hoisted his throne up on their shoulders. "A nice, quiet retirement far from civilization, all the comforts of Rome without any of the bustle."

"But what about us?" I said. And then I saw the cages. They were double-decker ones with wooden bars. We were herded into them, and they too were carried by natives: mangy ones, gap-toothed and

cross-eyed, clearly litterbearers of lower quality than those of Aquila the God.

The forests thinned; in a few days we were in open plains, sunny and verdant. We passed villages where we were eyed with disinterest; Aquila got all the attention.

Eventually we came to a broad paved road. As good as a Roman road it was. And in a few days we could see the walls of a vast city in the distance.

"Curse you all!" Aaye was saying for the thousandth time. He was in the same cage as I, in the lower compartment, so I was forced to listen to him. "You should have left me to die with the Apaxians. Oh, I know they'd have tied me to a rock in the desert and cut off my eyelids, but at least with them you knew where you were. You've certainly led me off the trail, you idiot general. No wonder Domitian made you procurator; it's a well-known fact that only the utterly unintelligent can ever rise in office, and . . ."

My fever had worsened. I was in no mood for any of this talk. As far as I was concerned, Domitian's ruse had proved all too successful; I was anxious to get it all over with.

We were coming into the gateway—

"They're—they're—it's true!" said the Egyptian, losing his ill humor at once. "They *do* have pyramids!"

I opened my bleary eyes and saw them. At the end of the avenue there was a huge one of gleaming stone; it must have had more than a thousand steps. And the street was lined with sculptures of heads as huge as buildings, their features a curious hybrid of Asian and African. Golden disks—sun-signs, clearly—hung from the walls, like giant saucers. People thronged the squares and marketplaces; I could have sworn this city was as big as Rome, if I hadn't known it was impossible.

"Maybe this is China after all," I said.

"Oh, no," Aaye said, falling automatically into his lecturing mode, "it's not China at all; for one thing, I haven't seen a single silkworm, and it is an established fact that the Chinish citizenry ride these silkworms, after disengaging their tails from their mouths, driving great hooks into their segments and urging them forward by the irritations they cause—"

"I think I read that," I said, "in one of the recent *scientiae fictiones*."

"Oh, no," he said, "it's the truth! You can't have opinions about truth! No, this is the land of the Olmechii for certain; the pyramids prove it. I'll show those doubters back at the academy! They'll have to believe me now! I'll make them grind up every papyrus they've

written against my theories and eat every word of their unscientific rantings!"

"We," I said, "are about to get sacrificed . . . or had you forgotten that, eh, old chap?"

"Minor matter, general; they're pyramid-builders, I'm an Egyptian, give me a couple of days and we'll be tighter than brothers . . . why, I'll bet they *are* Egyptians, stranded here in antediluvian times. We'll get along famously. It's an incontrovertible fact that we deep, inscrutable, and mystifying Egyptians can talk our way out of anything."

"Shut the idiot up!" Nikias moaned from a neighboring cage.

"Call me an idiot, will you? Me, the greatest theorist of all time, now that my theories have been vindicated!"

The flux hit me all at once then, and, using what dexterity was still left to me in my condition, I managed to void my bowels in the direction of the Egyptian, drenching him thoroughly. It was a childish gesture, and unworthy of a procurator-general, but it did shut him up.

We were dumped into a spacious prison, opposite the gargantuan pyramid-temple and overlooking the city square, and they gave me a potion that did wonders for my flux. Aquila had been installed in the temple across from us. Every day we would see him holding court from a throne of solid gold; I could tell he had been watching Caesar carefully, for many of his imperial gestures were an amusing parody of Domitian's. He mimicked to perfection the Emperor's gesture that signalled a concealed guard to execute the suppliant; but he seemed to do so merely in sport, for I saw no executions. He would never have made a good Roman emperor; our rulers know well the efficacy of a well-timed, spectacular execution of some important figure. It is thus that they are able to appease the mob, and thus it is that the Empire will last forever, though any individual emperor is lucky to survive a year or two . . . in short, Aquila seemed constantly to be showing such unkingly clemency that I was afraid the crowd would soon be bored to death and assassinate him. And that we could not have; for Aquila, savage that he was, was our only hope of rescue.

Day by day we watched. Far and away the most mysterious sight was that of golden disks that flitted about in the sky, resembling nothing so much as levitating dishes or saucers. Sometimes three or four of them would hover over the large pyramid for some minutes, and then vanish into the sky. We could not decide what they were,

although Aaye, who naturally had a theory handy, said that they were sun-sculptures and that the flying effect was brought about by constant rubbing of the pyramid's summit with huge house-sized cloths, just as a piece of electrum, or amber, can when briskly rubbed be observed to attract small particles of papyrus, engendering that ineffable and mystic force to which amber has lent its name.

The argument over this consumed several days. Food came at a slot in the prison door, a slab of solid rock that would not budge. Our clothes had been taken from us and we were forced to wear ridiculous loincloths; the material was soft and comfortable, and therefore effeminate and unworthy of a staunch and stalwart Roman.

The sights from the window were remarkable—

For these Olmechii (Aaye had convinced us they were not Chinish by the sheer weight and intricacy of the learning at his disposal) were by any lights the most technologically advanced nation in the world. It galled me to see them travel about in gilded motor-cars when Rome's motor-cars had all been destroyed in the Coliseum and the secret of their manufacture lost. It rankled to see they had a hovering device, floating from pyramid-top to pyramid-top by means of enormous leather balloons containing heated air from which dangled baskets of people; I will not say that such sorcery is beyond the Romans, because we are, by the grace of the gods, the dominant nation of the world after all, and are by nature superior to all peoples, whether as-yet-subjugated or not; but *I* had not seen it before. I longed to send a few such devices to Caesar.

"Imagine the spectacle!" I said, gnawing on an ear of maize. "We could stash gladiators in the baskets, and they could have at each other with catapultae and ballistae, flinging fireballs at one another as they soar over the sands of the Circus Maximus!"

"How can you think of such things," Nikias said, "when our death is imminent?"

I was brought down to earth. "If only there was some way of contacting Aquila—"

"He'll do nothing!" Aaye said gloomily. "Savage blood will always show, that's what I always say. Gullible, unreliable, and a dullard, there's your standard savage."

"Are you out of your mind?" said Nikias. "This is the man who singlehandedly won the Battle of Domitianopolis in Cappadocia by driving the Parthians into—"

"And made an utter fool out of *me*!" I grunted. "No, look at him out there. He's happy now; not many people get to be a god in their

own lifetime, you know. Even the old Caesars had to wait until the Senate declared it after their death, although *these days*—

"A plan!" Aaye cried. "I have a plan!"

"Ha! You, a plan!" Nikias said. "I remember well your scheme to make a few obols when we were children, selling lemonade in the streets of Alexandria in the middle of December."

The Lacotians among us were sitting apart, grunting or singing softly to themselves, with a great deal of *hunh-hunh-hunhing* and *hechitu weloing*. The three of us huddled together.

"What you don't realize, Nikias old chap," said Aaye, "is that I am by profession a trained astrologer, and as such am in the position of knowing a great deal about the proper motions of the sun and moon and stars. I happen to know a few things that will scare the living daylights out of these Olmechii."

"I doubt it," I said. "These Olmechii seem rather sophisticated to me."

"Appearance only, my dear general! For it is a well-known fact, a truism, indeed, that those not blessed with the . . . ahem . . . *Roman* citizenship are by their very natures superstitious, credulous, and incapable of rising above the status of simple peasants."

"If this city is but an appearance of civilization disguising utter savagery, it's bloody convincing, I say."

"Stuff and nonsense! Are these savages not making a big song and dance about sacrificing us to their gods? Back in the *real* Empire, people may be killed for amusement, as in our great epic spectacles of the arena, but it is hardly something to be taken *seriously*, as they are doing. The lack of a cynical attitude to life and death is a telltale sign of barbarianism. We'll never talk sense into them! No, I shall perform my patent razzle-dazzle, just as I so impressed the King of Parthia, who held me captive, with my lightning wit and arcane knowledge of trivia that he awarded me safe conduct to the country of my choice!"

"Poor Aaye. Never knows when he's being tactfully gotten rid of," Nikias said.

The two were at each other's throats; soon their beards had become entangled, and I had to extricate them from each other.

Just then one of the Lacotians, staring out of the window, began yammering. We all rushed over; an awesome sight greeted us.

Huge heads, of the kind we had seen lining the city streets, were hanging in the sky. Each was taller than three or four men; each dangled from a convoy of the heated-air-balloons, which soared high above thick as birds. Sun-disks hovered or darted about them; it

could now been seen, from the scale of the flying balloons, that these dish-like floaters were actually the size of palaces or temples.

"Extraordinary!" said Aaye. "A remarkable method of transporting heavy objects. . . ."

"Which would leave no trace on the ground, no evidence of where the rock was quarried . . ." Nikias said.

"Goodness," I said. "I'm going to *have* to wrest away the secret of these levitating baskets; I can just see them being used against the Partians! Imagine a squadron of these things pelting the enemy with rocks . . . we could easily cross Parthia and maybe have a stab at conquering India."

"Now who's daydreaming?" Aaye said. "First you pooh-pooh my plan without even listening to it, despite the fact that I am (admittedly by default) the most capable astrologer in this land. Then you talk as if we've already freed ourselves—"

The door opened at that moment. Olmechii, dressed in jaguar skins and armed with lances, came in and bound us fast.

"Well, fellows, this looks like it," I said, deciding that an eve-of-the-battle speech was called for. "Remember—"

"My plan! Don't you want to know my plan?"

"Oh, all right," I said, "let's have it. And it had better be something with a little more substance than your airy speculations."

"Ha! You have the gall to come to me now, after deriding my learning and abusing my person? I've half a mind to let you all perish—"

"Come, Aaye," Nikias said, "we're all in this together."

"Oh, very well, very well."

The light was blinding in the square. The avenues, the rooftops, the balconies were crammed with spectators in all their finery: span-gled loincloths, headdresses of feathers, furs, even the actual decapitated heads of various forest beasts; while above the traffic of golden disks and floating heads never ceased. But, in contrast to the festive atmosphere of a Roman spectacle, the rivers of wine, the carousing and the whoring and the catcalls, this was a very sober throng indeed. It was just as the Egyptian had said: these people were simply far too serious about the whole thing; they lacked the good Roman sense of sport and fair play.

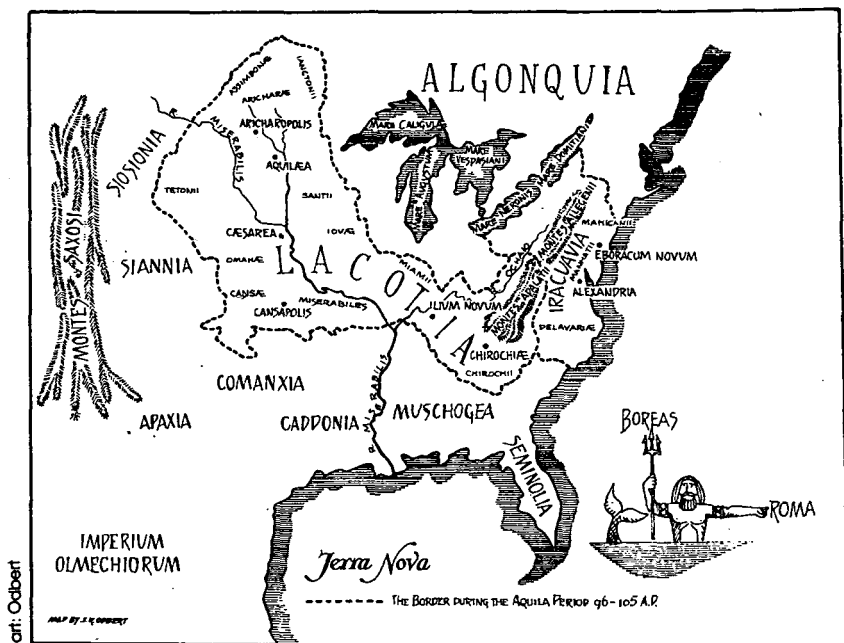
"Which is precisely what I shall rely on," said Aaye. "They'll swallow anything I tell them."

As we progressed down the avenue we were joined by other prisoners; most of them were of unfamiliar tribes, but there were a

certain number of Apaxae, Caddones, and Comanxae. Whether these had simply ventured too far south, or whether the Olmechii had raiding expeditions that traversed the very desert and crossed into the land of the River Miserabilis, I could not tell.

Soon were sounded tremendous cornua of stone from the tops of distant temples, a bleating noise with a tinge of croak to it. We reached the foot of the pyramid, and I assumed that we would now be forced to ascend to the summit; instead we were ushered into a little chamber within the base, which—wonder of wonders—began to rise, by pulleys or by some hydraulic mechanism as is used for the raising and lowering of scenery in the arena in Rome. Thus, without any expenditure of effort, we reached the top. There was a huge chamber there; from its windows I could see a panorama of the city, stretching limitlessly in every direction. It was clear now that these Olmechii were masters of super-science, so powerful as to be beyond the imaginings even of the writers of *scientiae fictiones*.

We were pushed to the ground in prostration. When I looked up I saw Aquila seated upon a throne, every inch the ruler; and at his feet, voluptuous and elegantly dressed in jaguar-skins and jade, was



a woman. When she spoke, the walls reverberated; and to my astonishment I found that as the words re-echoed they reformed into translations, into Lacotian and Apaxian among other languages. This was sorcery indeed! I no longer doubted that we had penetrated into one of the supernatural realms; for it was impossible that any race could be this much more advanced than Rome, without divine intervention.

"I am," she said, "the High-Priestess and Chief Consort of the Were-Jaguar-Golden-Sun-Disk-Almighty."

"Glad to know with whom I am dealing," I said in my halting Lacotian, which words immediately rebounded from the walls in a foreign tongue. (So the old man had been very well served indeed, I thought enviously, with such a woman as his official bride!) "Aquila!" I said in Greek. As I hoped, there was no wall-translation. "You've got to get us out of this!"

"Whatever for?" he said, waving a hand languidly. "There seems to be nothing I can do, and so I've decided to be philosophical about the whole thing."

The priestess said: "Here, then, is the order of the sacrifice. First the man who calls himself general, he with the bulbous nose—" I fought against the guards who held me at this physical insult, but I was too tightly bound. She went on down the list of names. "And finally, at the last rays of sunset, the great Personification Himself, the Living God"—Aquila beamed at this—"will condescend to resume his place in the sky among the High Ones from whom he has come—"

"Wait a minute," Aquila said. "Does this mean—"

Guards ran up and dragged the God down from his seat. "Oh, yes," the high priestess said. "Your sacrifice comes last. I thought you already knew."

Aquila shrugged. "Ah well. I am an old man, and I have seen the world come to many bad things. I have seen the *washichun* take my children's land from them; I have seen them made subjects to a distant self-named god whom I have myself met, a man who daily drinks and eats and indulges himself into a stupor. I am old, old, old. I have fought against the Romans, and I have fought for them; and I know that they will never leave our land. It is best that I die here, in a foreign country. Today is a good day to die! And though the manner of it *might* be a little unorthodox, there is, I think, some honor in it; for when I reach the land of many tipis, I shall say to all of them: *Here comes the Flapper of Wings, the man called Eagle, who has counted coup a thousand times and ended his life a god.*"

"But Aquila, old chap . . . can't you simply *command* that we be released?"

"I already tried. Oh, I tried. I know what cowards you Romans are."

I bristled.

"Wait!" Aaye said. My heart leapt. I knew he was going to try his ruse; which depended on a somewhat shaky astrological calculation.

"We are," Aaye said (in the Apaxian tongue, which the walls translated, "terrible sorcerers from the north. I tell you that we have power to control your god! For lo, in precisely . . . ten minutes, I will summon a great dragon from heaven who will swallow up the sun, and your days will be dark forever until you release us!" The guards were so surprised he was able to shake them off; he hobbled up to the high priestess and looked her in the eye. "For behold!" he said. "The dragon has even now begun to swallow the sun!"

For this was what he had told us; that, based on the calculations of Apollodorus of Bithynia, a solar eclipse happened to be due on this very day.

As we stood there the light began to dim very slowly. I heard the crowd murmuring outside.

The high priestess stared at Aaye curiously; then she began to laugh. At this all the guards laughed too, pointing at him and hooting hysterically.

"But it is happening at this very minute!" Aaye said. "Do you not believe me? Do you not deny that I, as a fullblooded Egyptian, am born with power to perform this feat?"

"Poor, silly man," said the priestess. "I suppose you must have been listening to the guards. Why, you superstitious little foreigner, you! Everyone in the whole empire knows there's an eclipse of the sun today. The Olmechii have never, in their thousand years of history, found anyone to equal them in the accuracy of their astronomical calculations. Not to mention the fact the the Great Were-Jaguar-Sun-Disk Himself frequently comes down and tells us things. Why do you think all those thousands are gathered out there? Surely you could not be so egocentric as to believe they are here to witness a mere sacrifice of the kind they can see any day of the year?"

At this Nikias too began to laugh. "First time in your whole life," he spluttered, "you actually make a correct prediction—and everyone in the whole town knows it before you do!"

Then I had to laugh too. There was no hope now. It was over. *Vale, Roma mea!* Darkness was falling rapidly now; the Olmechian guards had kindled torches and were holding them up. They pushed us out

onto the top of the steps, where there was an altar and other priests, dressed in jaguar-skins, waited. It was then that I saw the knives.

Madness overcame me then. I laughed and laughed until my eyes were blurry with tears. As they bound me to the altar I saw the sun's corona, dancing, shimmering, and the stars in their millions, and I thought of how insignificant my death really was in the midst of this awesome sight. The crowd wasn't watching me at all. Their eyes were all trained on the sun, stunned by the beauty of it. Then the blackness began to ease a little, and a corner of the sun glistened like a diamond on a ring of ebony.

I saw the high priestess nod—

Just then, the sun-disks that had been flying to and fro changed formation and started to swoop down in my direction! The priestess was shrieking something in her language. The crowd's attention was diverted for a moment.

They were coming straight for the top of the pyramid!

Suddenly all the terror I should have felt before burst loose from its cage within me. I started to scream. The golden disks, a dozen or more of them, grew enormous as they neared me. I knew they would crash into the pyramid and kill us all, that whatever mystic force that was holding them in the air must have dissipated—

I was blacking out fast. "Zeus help us!" I heard Nikias yelling as I lost consciousness. "The flying saucers are attacking!"

When I came to . . .

A chamber with walls of solid gold, it seemed; the walls curved inward, into a flattened dome. A huge window, glassed-in with some transparent substance, looked out over terrain: forests, rivers, plains, cities. We were very high up indeed. This must, I decided, be the actual interior of one of the golden disks that had descended upon us sacrificial victims and seemed to have snatched us up.

"The gods have intervened!" I said.

I looked around. The others were stirring beside me.

"Why, this is heaven itself!" Aaye said. "Walls of solid gold . . . death isn't so bad after all. I hope ambrosia is everything they say it is."

Nikias just smiled.

"I don't think we're dead at all." It was Aquila speaking. "I don't remember dying."

"Stuff and nonsense!" the Egyptian said. "You can see for yourself that we have been elevated far above the condition of men. Why, the view from this very window proves it. It is a fact, proven and incontrovertible."

"Bah," said Aquila.

"I want to go home," I said.

Suddenly a presence materialized in the middle of the room. With a shock, I recognized it—

Large as life! It was the very figurine that Domitian had sent to me, the very statuette that had precipitated this whole madness! A little green creature, perhaps an armspan in height, resembling an enormous human baby in the throes of turning into a jaguar.

So we *were* in the domain of the gods! What else could it be?

The thing began to address us in a high whiny voice. The walls mumbled a little, then shifted into Lacotian.

"We have saved you," said the were-jaguar, "because you don't seem to be the regular run of sacrificial victim. I would be most interested in knowing how you got here; you are Lacota, aren't you? From the north? My name is V'Deni-Keni, and I am an officer of the Dimensional Patrol. We protect the continuity, consistency and integrity of the millions of alternate universes within this continuum." I understood very little of what he was saying, but he went on to explain that they were from the far future and that they had come in search of certain criminals who had to be brought to trial, who were guilty of attempting to tamper with the past. . . .

"I see," I said in my halting Lacotian.

"Now," the little green man said, "which of you is the leader?"

All of them looked at me.

I looked at Aquila. He shrugged.

"I suppose I am," I said.

"Well, perhaps you can help us in our search. We have carefully avoided appearing in other hemispheres, in order not to change your continuum too much; but we suspect our criminals may have gone elsewhere—"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh?" the god seemed puzzled for a moment. "Ah, you mean . . . you don't know what I'm . . . I see. Well, with verbs beginning with *y-*, in Lacota, the *wa-* prefix for the first person usually mutates to *b'l-*, so the translating device was a bit puzzled by your dialectical variant—"

"Damn this intractable language!" I burst out in Latin. "I've had enough of barbarian languages. Mutating prefixes. Pronouns that get stuck into the middle of verbs. Extrinsic possessives. Male and female particles—I'm a Roman, and I'm fed up!" I knew that I wasn't in heaven. Not if the gods were going to correct my Lacotian grammar. And since this probably wasn't China either, I was almost

certainly in hell.

The were-jaguar fiddled with some device he wore on a bracelet. The translating wall buzzed and squeaked for a moment. Then it said, "Good heavens, old chap! A Roman, eh?" in perfectly good Latin. I could have cried with relief.

"Yes indeed. I am Titus Papinianus, your divinity, procurator of Lacotia, sometime dux of the Thirty-Fourth Legion."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, Lacotia? You people aren't supposed to be on this continent! By Jove! Are you sure?"

"Why, certainly. Crossed over on a sailing ship, you know."

"And you rule over these Indians?"

"Indians? These are not Indians. These are Terra Novans; India is another country altogether, and remains unconquered."

The god muttered a few things which the wall did not translate. Then there were several dozen of them in the room at once, jabbering away like a cageful of cats and dogs. I caught the odd phrase on the wall, but the more I heard, the more mystified I became.

"... must have made a wrong turning at the third tachyon nexus. ..."

"... nothing for it now, we'll have to tell headquarters, we'll have to abort the mission. ..."

"... can you get a fix on the right universe? Perhaps a wrinkle within the Riemannian time-construct. ..."

"... Romans in America, indeed! It's all K'Tooni-mooni's fault, I'm afraid; he brought this frightfully *intelligent* specimen from outside the official surveillance territory on board ... Epaminondas, I think his name was, must have run off with a few newfangled notions and made a whole new universe split off at timesector 101.24. ..."

"... anyhow, I resent having to abandon these Olmecs to their fate and take away their source of power. You remember what happened in the last universe, when we had to pull out four hundred years earlier?"

"... yes, their civilization vanished practically overnight! Mighty strange parallel world that was. Y'remember those Americans coming into power, with their cult of hamburgers and shopping malls?"

Well, we were standing around, getting more and more confused by the minute; you can tell from the scraps of conversation I overheard, which I have set down literally, even the bits which can't possibly make sense, that madness reigned supreme among these people.

"Am I going insane?" I said. "Is this some hallucination I am

having to cover up my terror as the knife slices into my chest?"

"Don't worry," Aquila said. "Back in Lacotia, we make a kind of tobacco mixed with a certain dried mushroom, and it induces dreams very similar to these. It'll wear off."

"But what's to become of us?" I shouted. The walls reverberated with the translation.

They stopped their chatter for a moment, and the one who had first addressed us did so again. "Oh, don't worry, chaps. You'll be released at the spot of your choice. Sorry to be such a nuisance to your dimension, and everything will be back to normal just as soon as we can arrange it. Oh, and we'll have gifts for all of you. Here." The ceiling opened and we were rained on by several hundred of the little jade were-jaguars. "Some small mementoes of our visit in your universe. Oh, and don't noise it about too much that you've seen us, eh? We're in enough trouble as it is with the Central Dimension Patrol Authority."

"The delta of the Miserabilis will do very nicely," I said stiffly.

When we got home I sent a shipload of jade were-jaguars to Domitian together with a note explaining as little of our adventure as I could get away with—for I knew we would not be believed. Aaye and Nikias opened an academy together in Caesarea-on-Miserabilis, and I went back to ruling my unruly savages.

It was more than six months before a reply arrived. As it chanced, our whole gang was together, for it was high summer and I had decided on a grand aurochs hunt to celebrate some festival or other. We had followed the herd for some days, making Lacotian camps by night.

It was towards evening; we were exercising our horses in the plains, when a messenger arrived from Caesarea with a message from the Emperor. When I unsealed the scroll I beamed with pleasure at first.

"Why, it's from General Trajan! Domitian, it seems, has been assassinated. Well, I'm awfully glad a decent military man has become emperor; we won't have any of these elaborate madcap jokes for a while at least."

But as I read through the letter my face fell. For Caesar had new orders for me.

Dear General Titus, it ran,

We have received your report on the Olmechii with interest, and your jade statuettes make welcome additions to the Imperial

AQUILA THE GOD

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Treasury. Nevertheless, We are somewhat distressed that you have not yet found China. It is Our conviction that the fabled Empire of Chin must be conquered, for Rome cannot tolerate a force greater than herself, even in hearsay.

We charge you, therefore, and authorize you, with due dispatch to seek out this land of Chin, wheresoever it may be upon the continent of Terra Nova; to furnish maps and charts of this empire, or at least to establish once and for all its mythical nature so that We do not have to fret constantly about the possible military challenge. . . .

Ave atque vale,

Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, Imp. Caes. August. and so on so forth.

"What shall I do?" I cried in despair. A strong wind blew from the west, making the tall grass sigh. In the distance the aurochs herd moved, dots of brown in the twilit hills. "Trajan has no idea of the vastness of this land! From here to the Montes Saxosi lies an endless wilderness of nature and savages. And beyond them?"

Aaye said, riding up to me, "You must go about this logically, procurator. You have tried the south, without any success. To the north are Athapasca and Algonquia, and frozen lands where surely the giant silkworms may not survive, for they are well known to be of a delicate disposition, and must continually be suckled with the milk of young Chinish maidens."

"If you know so much about the Chinish peoples, tell me where they are!"

"I was just getting to that! You impatient Romans . . . is it not true that gold deposits have been found in the Montes Saxosi?"

"Yes, but—"

"Let me finish. The Chinish folk are reputed to have yellow skins. Indeed, Apollodorus of Bithynia claims that their visages are normal in hue, but that their country is so rich that even the poorest among them paints his face with a paste of water and gold dust. . . ."

"And who is this Apollodorus who knows so much?"

"It is the pseudonym of a very great scholar, P. Josephus Agricola—"

"Another writer of those blasted *scientiae fictiones*! A dreamer. A weaver of escapist tales."

"When will you ever learn to trust me, general? Did I not cause the solar eclipse that enabled us to elude the altar of the Olmechian sun-god?"

I could see that he had convinced himself that he had indeed saved

our lives; but I did not bother to contradict him, because I was feeling too sorry for myself.

"What I'm telling you, general, is that this Chinish land may well be very near . . . just on the other side of the Montes Saxosi. If you would but follow the line of the setting sun—"

"Aquila," I said, looking to the old man for support. "What does he mean?"

"I think, young Titus," he said, "that he's telling you to go west."

I looked towards the sunset. Truly this was a beautiful land; and now it was no longer an alien one. Shafts of red light broke through the clustered clouds. "West, lad, west," Nikias whispered. They were treating me like a child or a younger brother, even though I was nominally their leader; but I was too confused to rebuke them, and I had grown fond of all of them.

Far over the horizon, I knew, were the Montes Saxosi, the most imposing mountains Romans had ever looked upon. Behind them was the land of the setting sun. Could it be that east met west there? "China," I said softly.

We sighted a wild creature in the distance—an elk, perhaps—silhouetted in the sunset. With whoops and cries—and mine were as hearty and savage as the Lacotians'—we galloped towards it and the last of the daylight.

[More notes to pacify purists:

[The Olmecs, in our continuum, died out, of course, before the first century A.D. when the Aquila series takes place; so I have created a transitional culture, mixing the little that is known about the Olmecs with smatterings of slightly later cultures whom they influenced.

[For the transliteration of the "Lacotian" language, I have stuck to the Teton dialect of Dakotah as analysed by nineteenth-century philologists. The Riggs phoneticization as adapted by Swanton and Boas was used as a base, but I have "Englished" some of the phonetic symbols to avoid giving the reader (and typesetter) a headache. —SS]



SFs AND Fs ON FIFTY-FIFTH STREET

by Martin Gardner

Readers of this column may remember that on two occasions I have written about a curious shop run by a gnomelike old man named Raymond Dero Palmer. His shop has a way of moving mysteriously around the streets of Manhattan.

I never expected to find the shop in Chicago; but a few months ago, when I was attending a conference on number theory at the University of Chicago, I decided to stroll along Fifty-Fifth Street to see how much it had changed since I had lived there many decades ago. A few blocks from the Illinois Central Railroad tracks, I passed the familiar dirty window of a tiny shop that sold old SF books and magazines. A crudely lettered card on the doorknob said:

OUT TO LUNCH FROM 80 MINUTES PAST NOON TO 1:20 P.M.

I glanced at my watch before I realized that the sign was telling me the proprietor was *never* out to lunch.

Sure enough, when I walked in, there sat Mr. Palmer, his large head barely projecting above a battered desk. Two pale blue eyes peered at me over a cheese sandwich he was nibbling.

"You again," he said.

"Me again," I replied, looking around. On a dusty table in back was a large pile of *IA'sfms*. Beside them was the sign reproduced below:

SPECIAL SALE!

BACK ISSUES OF ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

All different! Fifty cents each!

The science fiction stories and science fact articles in *IASfm* are the product of years of scientific study, followed by years of writing experience.

R. D. Palmer

The magazines were neatly stacked so that their spines alternated with their page-edge sides. I counted 20 spines on one side of the stack. Then I walked around to the opposite side and counted 20 edges.

How many magazines were in the stack? Try to figure it out before checking the answer on page 63.



COURSING

by Barry N. Malzberg

art: Jack Gaughan

Mr. Malzberg recently
played violin in a concert
of Mr. Sucharitkul's music,
conducted by the composer...
which really has nothing to do
with this strange story,
but does go to show
that SF writers are
a versatile lot indeed...

There was this woman and her name was Maria. She lived in a console of the great ship *Broadway* and whispered to Hawkins in the night, promises of love and fealty, warmth and connection. Hawkins could not touch her, could not consummate the promise because she was a simulacrum, a collection of electrons and impulses in the bottle but she made dark periods lively indeed and they had promised that at the end of the voyage, if Hawkins were to do what he was meant to, she would be waiting for him, the real Maria; and she would make all these things true. Hawkins did not really believe this, did not believe any of it but the light years were vast, the ship was vacant and full of the stink of antiseptic, and if he were not able to converse with Maria there would have been nothing at all. So he thanked them in his heart for their time and trouble, their cruelty and their manipulateness, and let it go by. He let everything go by. The twenty-fourth century was all accommodation.

Hawkins, a felon interred on Titan, had been given a conditional release to go to the Pleiades System and negotiate with the King of the Universe. The King of the Universe, through pulsar, had advised the inner clusters that he would destroy them greatly unless every knee bent and every tongue did give homage. The King of the Universe might have been insane, but very little was known of the Pleiades Cluster and it was assumed that any culture with technology advanced enough to make possible this kind of communication could not be dismissed out of hand. *Half* a hand yes—send them a felon to do the negotiating—but the last time an alien threat had been entirely ignored brought about the Slaughtering Hutch of a hundred years. The King might have been a child given access to powerful communications *matériel* or a lunatic acting out for therapy; on the other hand he might be exactly what he said, in which case the inner clusters had a problem. Hawkins, a failure, was half a hedge against riot. Keep a civil tongue, the Advisors had said, evaluate the situation, and try to buy him off; if he refuses to negotiate or turns out to be what he seems then you know where the self-destructs are. Try to get near enough to take the King down. There's enough armament on the *Broadway* to take down the Pleiades themselves. And have a good time; after all, the Advisors concluded, that's what it's all about, isn't it? Thirty-three Earthdays is nothing for a man who has done half a lifetime; think of it as front-loading.

Hawkins lay in the ship's abcess, just inside the probes, and said to Maria, "This isn't going to work. They'll wipe me out as errata; we're an unidentified flying object."

"I love you," Maria said softly; "I want to hold you against me.

You are the gentlest and most wonderful man that I have ever known and I want you to be mine, all mine."

"I have to get serious," Hawkins said; "there's no time for passion here."

"Don't put me off, you dark fool," Maria said. "Closer and closer. Touching in the night. You will pacify the King and return; we will meet on Ganymede and in the silence and the density we will hold one another. Oh, if we had only met earlier; none of this would ever have happened to you."

Hawkins said, "I don't want to think about what it would have been like if we had met earlier. I don't want to talk about that now." He reached for the volume switch and lowered Maria's voice to a soothing burble. For reasons which were quite sufficient the technicians had made it impossible for him to cut off Maria completely, but he was able at least to modulate; this made it possible for him to find some periods of sleep. In the intricate alleys of metal and wire he could still hear her voice, extract the shape of words. *Lover. Apposite. Breasts.* Hawkins felt a regret which verged on pity, but he urged himself to be strong. He could not listen to her now. He was scheduled for a confrontation with the King of the Universe shortly. The King had scheduled it all. Hawkins would be brought before him in the dock of an artificial satellite and explain his condition, offer his terms. The King had stated that he had not been surprised; he knew that it would only be a matter of time until the Inner Cluster sued for mercy. The *Broadway* had been tracked all the way with farsighted devices, had been under the King's mighty surveillance since it had torn free of the sun outside the orbit of Jupiter.

Hawkins huddled in the ship and awaited judgement. He thought of all the alleys and corridors of his life which, like the alleys and corridors of the ship, seemed to work endlessly and musically against one another, bringing him to this tight and difficult center. If he had done this then he might not, instead, have done that; if he had served his time penitentially rather than with defiance they might have sought someone else to deal with the King. But then again defiance was good because they needed a man who would take a position and most felons got broken within the early months of their confinement. Then too there was Maria who had been given to inflame and console but with whom, instead, he had fallen into a difficult kind of love. It was not her corporeality but the electron impulses themselves, the cleverness and sophistication of the device,

which had hooked him in. Someday, if he lived through this, he would try to explain it all to the technicians. He doubted if they would listen; creating their wonderful devices they had come only to hate themselves because they could not be part of them. If the twenty-fourth century was for accommodation, then it was also for paradox. It was a paradoxical age. The *Broadway* veered and the grey abscesses colored to flame; the King of the Universe materialized before him in holographic outline. "I thought this would be easier," the King said. "Of course I am at a good distance from this image so don't think of anything foolish."

Hawkins was thinking of nothing foolish, concentrating instead upon the holograph. The King was a wondrous creature; the form was avian but like no bird that Hawkins had ever seen, and the beak was set of fierce design. The King half-turned, seemed to preen, displayed feathers. "Do you like this?" he said. "I wanted an imposing design in which to appear."

"Then this isn't how you look?"

"This is *exactly* how I look," the King said, "and this is no time for conundrums. Can you give me any reason why I should not sack and destroy the Inner Cluster?"

"I have brought priceless gems," Hawkins said; "if you sack and destroy there will be none of them left. Also, as a creature of some sensitivity you would not want to destroy ten trillion sentient and vulnerable souls, would you?"

The King winked. "You don't believe me," he said, "you think that only a lunatic would address you over the light years, threaten destruction, call himself the King of the Universe."

"On the contrary," Hawkins said, "we take you very seriously or why would I be here?"

"I can't answer that," the King said, "I merely run things, not try to account for them; and I must tell you that I am sore displeased. I think I'll appropriate your gems and dematerialize you."

"Don't do it so quickly," Hawkins said. It was impossible for him to tell whether the King was serious or capable of such action, but the entire mission had been predicated on the fact that he might be, and his own condition was humbling. "Don't do it," he said again, pleadingly. "We're not without a history. There are elements of our tradition which are honorable. If not science, art; if not art a certain damaged religiosity." *Why am I defending us?* he thought; this was the civilization, those were the technicians who first imprisoned me and then sent me out with the simulacrum of a woman to tantalize

and to die. Truly, the situation is indefensible. Perceiving this, knowing that his thoughts were moving toward hopelessness and failure, Hawkins reached out and moved the volume switch. "Tell him," he said. "Tell him the things that you tell me, Maria."

"He is a good man," Maria said, "I love him desperately. We talk in the night; he tells me many things. When he returns to Titan I will dwell with him in holiness and fealty forever."

The King fluttered. "Who are you?" he said.

"My name is Maria and I am the lover of this man, Hawkins. He is a good man."

"Where are you?"

"I walk on this ship and to and fro upon it. Where are you?"

The King said, "That is not the issue." His speech had slurred; he seemed to have lost that edge of high confidence with which he had threatened destruction. "Show me yourself."

"That is not necessary," Maria said, "I am faithful to this one man."

"Abandon him," the King said, "and come to me instead. Perhaps we can work out something."

"I won't do that."

"Maybe something can be worked out," Hawkins said carefully. "It isn't absolutely necessary—"

"Offer him the diamonds, but don't offer him me."

"I don't want the diamonds," the King said. He sounded petulant. "I can have the diamonds *anyway*."

She is a simulacrum, Hawkins thought, a memory, an instance, unpurchasable. But instead he said, "If you return with me to the Inner Cluster you can have her."

"Why return? I want her *here*."

"Love is impossible in space," Hawkins said quietly. "The eternal vacuum, the interposition of organism upon the void makes love impossible. Accept my assurances on that."

"I cannot return with you," the King said after some silence, "I would burn in the vastnesses of space. I am unprepared for a journey of any sort, confined to my castle. Leave her here."

"I'm afraid not," Hawkins said. "She would perish."

"Yes, I would perish," Maria said coldly. "I would most surely perish, Hawkins, if I could not have you. I am not property; I am your lover, I cannot be treated in this fashion."

"You can be treated in any way I want," Hawkins said. "Remember the conditions. You were delivered to give me solace, not argument."

Nonetheless," he said to the King, "as you see it is quite impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," the bird said, "not to the King of the Universe," and the bird turned, opened both impenetrable eyes and clawed at the floor. "That is my demand," he said, "leave her here and the diamonds, and you may go. The Inner Cluster will be spared. Take the diamonds, in fact. I don't need them."

Hawkins said, "For the greater good, Maria, for all circumstance, I ask you—"

"I love you," the simulacrum said. "I know that I was made part of the equipment merely to convenience, to give you solace, but I'm quite out of control and it's you I love. I don't want to deal with any bird."

"I'm not really a bird," the King said, "this is merely a form which I project. Actually I can be anything at all. You would be most pleasantly surprised."

"Appearances mean nothing to me," Maria said, "I'm sorry but it's quite impossible. This wasn't how the situation was supposed to be, but it's how matters have turned out, I'm afraid. No, Hawkins, I will not yield."

"Then neither will I," the King said, "I am not a paranoid Pleiadan but the true and invincible King of the Universe, and I will make good on my threats. I tracked you from Jovian orbit, Hawkins; I had hoped that it would be for better outcome."

Hawkins looked at the figure of the bird, the eyes and figures glinting in the tight spaces of the cabin; he listened to the continued murmuring of Maria, now plaintive as she explained why she could not leave him. Hawkins looked at one simulacra and listened to the other as the *Broadway* ebbed and dipped in station, thinking I am man, I am twenty-fourth-century man, era of accommodation and paradox, felon of the twelfth order; you are in a Hell of a spot now. A Hell of a spot for she cares.

But he wasn't. He really wasn't, after all. As he heard Maria begin to shriek in passion, as he heard her say *oh King o King o King* he came to understand that for some dilemmas there is, after all, resolution; if not flesh, then steel is all. *Oh Kingokingoking* Maria cried, and as the *Broadway* grandly broke stasis he began to see the light of eternity open up to him. *He's wonderful!* Maria cried, *OKing!*

There was this woman and her name was Maria; she loved Hawkins, she said, and first refused the impossible embraces of a mad Pleiadan but there was a grander design and she saw it saw it saw it *okingoking*.

Hawkins felt the tumble of paradox.
Just before the blankness he mumbled, *faithless bitch*.
O flawless faithless one.



SOLUTION TO SFs AND Fs ON FIFTY-FIFTH STREET (from page 56)

The number of magazines in the stack could be 39, 40, or 41. When I counted 20 edges I counted the *same* set of magazines I counted before when I counted 20 spines. The magazines in the other set could be 19, 20, or 21.

"Twenty bucks seems high," I said, assuming there were 40 magazines in the stack. "I'll give you ten for the lot."

Palmer finished his sandwich, washed down the last bite with a swig of beer, and wiped his mouth on the back of a coat sleeve.

"It's a deal," he said, "if you can pass my **F** test."

"Your what test?"

"My **F** test." He aimed a pencil at the sign on the table. "You read that a moment ago. I saw you reading it. Now read it again slowly, from start to finish, and count all the **F**s on the sign. If you can tell me the correct number, you can have all the magazines for ten. If you miss, you have to pay twenty."

The offer seemed fair enough. I read the sign carefully, counting the **F**s. When I finished I called out a number.

"Wrong!" shouted the gnome. He leaped from his chair and walked toward me, rubbing his palms together and chortling.

And you know, he was right! Maybe you can do better. Go back and read the sign again *just once*. No fair checking it more than once. How many **F**s do you count? Turn to page 95 to see if you would make a good professional proofreader.



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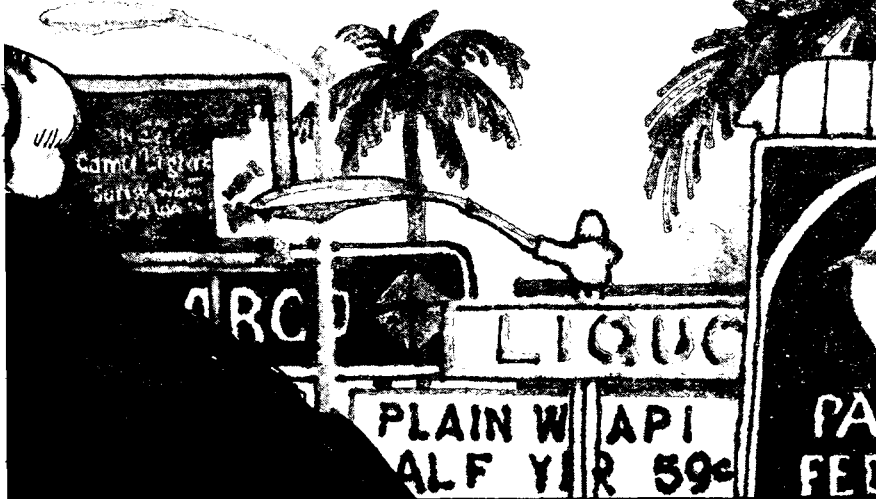


PARASITES OF PASSION

by Brian Aldiss

art: Bob McMahon

Mr. Aldiss does not live in Southern California: he's currently a resident of Oxford, England. Yet he seems to have the California scene well in hand here...but see for yourself.



The picture was a bit jerky. It showed a desolate piece of coastline bathed in weak sun. Native shacks loomed into view, then were replaced by sand. No vegetation was to be seen. The shots had been taken from a moving car.

"Just to remind you that this is amateur tape," Vic Barron said, in his microphone voice. "It hasn't quite got the gloss of professional footage. It was shot last month by a regular viewer to the 'Bug Vic Barron' hour, Al Patrocci of Santa Barbara. Al says he was down in Baja California near La Paz when—you can see him in frame now. That's Al Patrocci. The lady with him in the fancy pants is a friend. We don't have her name. Or address. Sorry."

A man and a woman were walking across broken sands towards the ocean. He was plump and grey-haired, she golden and slender. He gesticulated broadly as he walked away from the camera. They headed towards a herd of seals and sea lions, whose bodies were strung out along the beach. Soon the viewers were looking in close up at the beached mammals.

"Don't forget, if you know anything interesting in connection with entomology—that's bugs of all kinds—get in touch with me, Vic Barron, care of the 'Bug Vic Barron' show, every Tuesday night from this station. . . . The interesting thing about these shots Al Patrocci's sent us is that we can see the ordinary old Californian sea lions, plus a few Northern sea lions, but—hey, will you look at that? This ugly old guy is a bull. See his mane. Downward-sweeping whiskers. He's a real old-timer."

The bull seal in question made a lunge at the camera, which retreated fast. There was an ungallant shot of Patrocci's lady friend running back towards the car, at which Vic Barron had a laugh.

"See, these Northern fur seals never used to show up as far south as the Baja, as Al reminds us. It's just one more indication of the adverse climatic change we all know is going on around us, year by year."

The redoubtable Patrocci came into the frame, advancing with a short-barrelled carbine-type gun. As the bull seal reared up at him again, Patrocci fired. The bull shook its reddish mane, squeezed its small eyes together, and crumpled forward slowly on to the beach, to lie with its face half-buried in the sand, whiskers trailing.

"It's okay," Vic Barron said. "I don't allow carnage on my show, please note. That was a shot of anaesthetic, enough to knock the old feller out for a half-hour, no more. Al assures me his job is chief anaesthetist at San Diego General Hospital Four, and he knows his business."

Patrocci bent forward, one knee in the sand. He stroked away the short manè on the seal's head, so that a small external ear was revealed.

"Contrary to popular legend, these seals have small external ears. Now watch this. Bug of the Week coming up."

Barron's words covered a pause in the action, whilst the camera zoomed dizzily away to take in the shore, stretching into the distance, with waves pounding against low-lying reefs. Then back to the aural cavity, looking in close-up like the cone of a volcano. A pair of tweezers sank into it, and pecked like the beak of a giant metal bird among the folds of black gristle and bristle. It emerged again, bringing with it a small insect, wriggling with all possible appendages.

The amateur film stopped. A magnified view of the insect was shown, a nasty thing with clicking mouthparts, eight stubby legs, and a long tail, beautifully lit and photographed.

"It's a mite, a variety of *Demodex folliculorum*, but don't let the long name scare you off. It causes mange, and it's what Al Patrocci found in the seal's ear. Al Patrocci, you have caught the Bug of the Week. You have truly and inordinately Bugged Vic Barron. What story do you have to tell of this active little mite?"

And Al Patrocci was there in the studio, smoothing his sparse hair, grinning uncomfortably at Vic Barron as he sat uncomfortably in the studio chair.

"See, the interesting thing, Vic, the interesting thing is that this mite is found no other place than in the ear of the Northern fur seal—except for one other place." He paused, waiting for his cue.

"And that place is . . . ?"

"Vic, did you ever hear of the Yakuts?"

"Kind of shaggy ox?" Studio laughter.

"No, sir, not a yak. The Yakuts are a tribe," said Al Patrocci, smiling ruinously. "They're people who live in Siberia now. Many centuries ago, they were a great nation, with emperors and things of their own. They lived on the East Siberian coast of the Pacific, and spoke a language of their own, and had book-learning, and killed off other tribes, and were pretty civilized. Then they moved inland over the centuries and came under Russian domination. Now there's a whole lot of concentration camps where they live."

"Remember you're on a bug show, Al Patrocci. No politics."

"It's cold where the Yakuts live, mighty cold, specially now the seasons are more frequently achieving zeroes in the northern hemisphere. So the Yakuts, male and female, have hair in their ears."

Vic raised a triumphant finger. "Don't tell me! And in those ears . . ."

Al Patrocci told him. "In those ears, you find this same variety of mite, and nowhere else on earth, excepting in the aural cavities of the Northern fur seal."

"Well, you have me utterly fascinated, Al Patrocci. And can we draw any conclusions from this? — In under a minute, I mean, 'cos our time's just about up."

Al Patrocci smoothed his thin moustache as if about to spit, and said, "The seals breed on the Pribilof Islands up in the Bering Sea and around the Siberian coast where the Yakuts came from. Here's a picture of a Yakut."

And up came a picture of a rather greasy Yakut with a little round head, dark hair glossed back, small-eyes blinking behind epicanthic folds.

Fighting the time limit, Al Patrocci went on, "Don't he look like a certain sea mammal? The Yakuts used to live off the seals and control their breeding. They also used to breed *with* them when women were scarce. The mites are much older than men. Fossils of them are found in rock dating back fifty million years. I read about it in *Pan-American Sciences*. Seals also go back a long time. So by this shared mite, which causes mange, we can see that present-day man is actually descended from *seals*. Not from apes, as thought by Darwin, but from seals. Hence the view many scientists have held for years that *Homo sapiens* went through a marine stage. We did, right enough. As seals."

Barron's eyes glowed. "And this is your contribution to scientific knowledge, Mr. Al Patrocci?"

"It is, Vic, and it turns human thinking upside down."

Barron's eyes glowed still more as he swivelled his chair to greet the lens now homing in on his narrow intellectual countenance.

"It does, indeed, Mr. Al Patrocci of Santa Barbara, and remember that we turn human thinking upside down every week, right here on the 'Bug Vic Barron' show. See you. . . ."

Up came the music, the Salute to Parasitology theme. It sounded slightly like Richard Strauss, with just a dash of Sammy Kahn.

As the studio lights dimmed, Bert Chalvin, the film editor, said to Vic Barron, "It went fine. I still say the best bit of tape went on the cutting-room floor."

Barron was putting on a flowery padded jacket over his blue denim shirt. He looked round uneasily. "Do you have that length of tape, Bert?"

"Sure. It's on my desk. I couldn't throw it out. You want that we should give it a run-through again, for our private entertainment?"

America's Most Popular Bug Man shook his head. "No, no—I, er must hurry somewhere. Let me have it to look at back at my place."

He pocketed the strip when Chalvin handed it over. With hastened gait, he strode from the building, through the foyer, where there was a large photoportrait of him, smiling cheekily over the ovipositor of an ichneumon wasp. **Barron—Mr. Big of the Bug World**, it manifested. To dodge any fans who might be waiting outside, Barron slipped through a modest side door into the street.

His motor bike, a gleaming three-wheeler with dome, was waiting. He unlocked it, climbed on, and set the controls for home. Unnoticed, a giant figure slipped out of a nearby alley, jumped on a two-wheeler, and followed the dome-bike at a watchful distance.

The old coach had to be continuously steered in the old-fashioned way. It had solar panels on its roof to recharge its auxiliary batteries. It was painted in vertical red and yellow stripes. On its sides it bore a now slightly unfashionable ecological slogan: **SAVE THE MEASLES VIRUS**. That battle had been fought and won.

The coach came from the north, approaching through Burbank on the old U.S. Route 99. It passed through the centre of L.A. and, eventually, Fullerton, where it branched off on to smaller roads, heading for the coast. On the way, its uncertain progress caused some twenty near-accidents among the automated traffic.

The vehicle arrived in a dusty side-road. A ranch-style house stood silent behind a thick floral hedge; it sported a **FOR SALE** board under the name of a local realtor. The driver, a young man in overalls, jumped down; opened the gate; and drove his vehicle up the drive and round the back of the house. There he spent some while unloading it. Half an hour later, he was on his way again. The interior still smelt strongly of the livestock it had carried.

Down the road, the driver made a phone call from a pay booth in a café.

"Dolphin? Elephant here. Delivery has been made as per usual. I'd advise collection as soon as you can."

He listened blank-faced to the complaints from the other end. The woman's voice was very deep. As before, he wondered if it really was a woman.

"Just one thing I maybe should tell you. The white dye on the animals ain't waterproof. You hear? You can't get the usual stuff in the whole area just now."

After a moment, he interrupted a further spate of complaints. "That's your problem," he said. "I've done what I was asked. It's a hell of a journey, gets worse. The freeways are patched like old pairs of jeans. They don't keep them up any more. Pay in to my account number at the First National as usual, okay?"

He rang off, bought himself a soft drink, and returned to the coach.

Vic Barron lived alone. His bungalow stood almost at the end of Canyon Drive, where a sharp turn of the track went upwards and round, so that the building at once commanded a view of the beach and was itself overlooked by few other dwellings. Blinds were down at all of the windows.

Barron went through to the kitchen area and poured himself a mug of unsweetened black coffee, which he took over to his work place. He relaxed on a sofa until he had finished his drink. Setting the mug down on the floor, he went to the large desk and switched on his editor. He produced the rejected tape from his pocket and fed it in.

The beach again, kelp-strewn, fading by the infinite ripples with which the sand imitated the water's movement from beach to sea. Idiotic things, beaches, Barron thought. Seals, slug-like in the pale sun. The shoulder of Al Patrocci, the denim-clad buttocks of his girl friend, bending to pick up a shell.

Behind the human figures, a long expanse of beach, dotted with seals. And someone walking. Walking fast.

Barron peered down into the viewer. The someone looked enormous. His figure seemed to defy perspective. His ungainly bulk moved with abnormal speed across the sand. There was something familiar in that mechanical stride. Barron's heart beat rapidly. A buttock intervened, as they will even in the best organised lives.

The gigantic person was stomping through a seal harem. The bull reared up to bar his way—this was all incidental, and nothing that Al Patrocci's cameraman had intended to pick up—so that Patrocci's head and his girl friend's plump behind eclipsed it at intervals—the bull appeared to threaten the giant person. The giant person—Barron gave a sob of alarm—bent down and grasped the bull seal firmly. The seal fought, swivelling its head to bite this unnatural opponent—yes, one would bellow, being in that foul grip! It was lifted up into the air.

"Damned thing must weigh a ton," Barron told himself.

For a moment, staggering slightly, the gigantic figure stood with the bull seal poised above its head. Then it hurled the unfortunate

beast away.

The seal flew several yards through the air, turning, before it struck the waves. A shoulder, a head, a buttock, intervened. The clip was finished. It had lasted seconds.

Shaking only slightly, Vic Barron shuffled into the kitchen area, opened a cupboard, and unbottled two small yellow pills, which he washed down with water from the drinking water container. He recognised the seal-hurler, right enough. Oh yes, he recognised him. He had known the seal-hurler all of two centuries ago, the damned parasite. He went back into the studio and checked to see that his automatic was still in the top left-hand drawer of his desk. He had a horrid feeling that he was going to be visited any time now. The hurling of seals was probably but a limbering up for the wrath to come.

The horrid feeling, that particular horrid feeling, which manifested itself as a dryness in the throat, a ringing in the ear, a tension in the chest, a rumbling in the stomach, a longing to urinate, and a distinct tremor round the kneecaps, had made itself known almost nine years back. That was the period when West Coast media were hunting for indications of the new ice age, and came up with the southbound icebergs off Vancouver Island and the Washington coastline. One of the hoary old legends of yellow journalism had revived: **TWO MONSTROUS BODIES EMBALMED IN ICE.** Were the monstrous bodies seen in the melting ice bodies of a race of pre-human man? Could one be male, one female? And, if that was so, could they be revived and induced to mate?

Induced, my God? Barron had muttered to himself, as the experts eagerly discussed these questions on television, and reached for his pills. But the iceberg figures had been glimpsed only by a drunken vacationing Seattle fisherman, and his MVS photographs had not been of the best, and in a few days Suk der Sak, the porock star, had committed suicide. The world went back to normal and Barron stopped overdosing himself with the longevity pills. But the horrid feeling had told him what he knew even then. His old adversary was going to catch up with him.

"Even in twenty-first-century America, such things happen," he said, slipping the automatic into his pocket. Maybe he'd move to Brazil.

When dusk fell, he did not dare show a light. Anyone lingering in the neighbourhood would think he was away. Fortunately, there was a moon, creating dim submarine pools of illumination through

which he floundered like an aquatic lifeform of dubious viability. A ghostly white owl fluttered across his lawn, hooting intellectually. He retired to bed early, and snored as quietly as possible.

The wildest dreams assailed him. He woke, bathed in sweat. Through the dim and yellow light of the moon, he beheld the monster he had created which had bugged him for so long. His eyes were fixed on Barron. His jaws opened and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, whilst a grin of attempted friendship wrinkled his cheeks.

"Now we can have a talk, Master," he said.

Barron tried to jump from the bed, but the intruder caught him by the wrist and jerked him on to his back. Resistance left Barron. This was worse than his wildest dreams. Who would have recommended icebergs as a form of transport?

"Leave me, leave me. I've never done you harm. I gave you life, remember."

The creature's laugh was hollow. Tombs laughed with more humour.

"But you never loved me, Master. You gave me life but no love."

"Love you! Who could bear the horror of that countenance? A mummy endowed with animation . . ."

With some complacency, the intruder said, "You may be surprised to know that I'm quite a hit with the women. Particularly Californian women. They appreciate the exotic, Master."

"Don't call me Master. I have a new name now. The old days are all forgotten. This is a new time and a new world."

"And I suppose you had forgotten me, too. Oh, it's cruel, cruel. Humans are so cruel. . . . Why, you made me. I'm . . ." The creature's sob vibrated like a lion's roar. "I'm your son, Victor. You don't mind if I call you Victor?"

"I have no sons. You're crazy. I have no progeny at all."

"Progeny. Ah! That's what I want to talk to you about. Get up and get dressed."

The creature quitted the bedroom, leaving Barron to dress. He contemplated jumping out of the window or shooting himself with his automatic; but, after indecision, he went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The habit of living was hard to overcome, particularly when one had lived for two centuries without feeling the strain. Damn it, he said to himself, there are insects I haven't even set eyes on yet. Once I've made enough lolly out of this bum TV show . . .

He would have to get rid of the monster. That was for sure. The

monster had been a mistake—a pretty costly one, but nevertheless a mistake, a blind alley. What had really obsessed him, even before his days as a science student at Ingoldstadt University, had been the question of deteriorating cell tissue. He had to figure out why cells reproduced themselves happily many times over, then suddenly lost the programming and failed. That was what spelt death to the individual, that alone.

Using bugs, whose lifetimes went by so satisfyingly fast, he had acquired his lifelong passion for entomology. Then, fool that he was, he had become ambitious. He should have stuck with insects. . . .

Only when he had seen the solution to his problem, and the method by which the mitochondria of cells could be repowered electrically, had he begun those disastrous experiments with the reanimation of human corpses. He had created the accursed monster who had caused him so much misery. The expense! The adverse publicity! The exhausting travel through so many time zones!

Just two years after he had driven the monster into the wastes of the Arctic, and his own death had been falsely reported, he had completed his line of cellular research, and had invented immortality. By then, his reputation ruined, he shunned all publicity, keeping his secret to and for himself. Before the commencement of the twentieth century, he had left Europe for the New World, and settled down happily to enjoy a few hundred years working on entomological studies. And all the time, that damned parasite had enjoyed a different kind of immortality, imprisoned in a block of ice. Well, Barron told himself, as he zipped his trousers, now for a final showdown. . . .

The monster was walking round Barron's living area, drinking a Coke and smashing the odd piece of furniture by bashing into it by accident. It smiled at Barron, who winced as if a grave had opened. Certainly, the creature was a sickening thing, immense, mis-shapen, ugly beyond the point of parody, its facial skin a lumpy grey. But Barron was in control of himself now; and the horrid feeling had gone, replaced by determination.

"So, you monster, you managed to seek me out again . . ."

"As it happens, I live right down the street—and don't call me that. It's Daryll Angers now, okay? You changed your name, I changed mine. You can call me Daryll. After that iceberg, I got ashore and came to work down here in L.A."

He added, with a modest grin—and for the first time Barron noticed the dimples, or maybe acne pits—"I'm in movies, making quite

a thing of it. Acting."

"Acting? In front of cameras? You?"

"Frankenstein's monster. Never short of a job. I was in the Universal Studios when I first happened to see you on the small screen, holding forth about a bird nematode which copulates in the windpipe of hens, after which male and female remain conjoined for life. You made some moral point, I forget what. I immediately tried to get in touch. Then I latched on to acting jobs, first in Tokyo, then in Mexico City. The Tokyo studios are great for horror work."

"By accident, I came across some footage of you killing a seal."

"I hate seals. I kill 'em whenever I can." Daryll Angers sat down on a leather sofa, which crumpled but held. He gestured to another chair. "Take a seat, Master. Enough idle gossip. I want advice from you, and maybe more than advice. Maybe quite a lot more . . ."

Barron sat on the edge of a chair, hand clutching the gun in his pocket. "What sort of advice?" he asked apprehensively.

The monster looked bashful. The effect was horrifying. "Medical advice. I can't go to a doctor. If a medico examines me and sees all those clumsy scars you planted all over me, and the non-matching skin colours, he'll guess who I really am. So it's you or no one. See how I need you still, after all this while?"

"Don't whine. Get it over with. What do you want?"

"When you—when you made me, Master . . . well, you missed a vital bit off. The anatomy wasn't completed. You never intended me to have any pleasure, did you?"

Barron lifted his hands, protesting innocence. "I never expected you to—to survive. That's why I did such a rough job. . . . So I—I admit that I didn't bother with . . . Under the clothes, nobody could see."

The monster drained his glass and flung it down. "Some creator you were! Supposing the human race had been created casually like that? You wouldn't have got far, would you? It's shaming for me, believe me, shaming. . . . I'm malicious because I'm missing something. When you made me a mate, you gave *her* the necessary. Why not me?"

Getting up, Barron started pacing about, wringing his hands. The discussion was distasteful to him, and he said as much. "It was easy with her. I was fortunate enough to acquire the corpse of a young lady of easy virtue—that was the phrase we used at the time. A young lady of easy virtue. She committed suicide, I recall. Jumped in the lake. But with you—there was considerable difficulty in obtaining a good fresh male trunk. In the end, I accepted delivery of

one that was slightly high. Tissue deterioration was particularly marked in . . . in the part you refer to. I was in a fix. Finally, I cut it off. It had decayed at the end. At the last moment, some fellow I employed brought me a newly defunct German shepherd dog, and I almost repented and grafted that on. . . . But you wouldn't have liked that, would you?"

"Stop marching about the room. You make me nervous. I only want what's due to me."

"Can't be done. I haven't the surgical skill nowadays."

Sinking his gigantic head between his fists, the monster spoke into his outsize sneakers. "Misery is my lot. Love will never come my way. This will break up my marriage for sure. Unlike your bird nematodes, we're going to have to live apart. . . ."

TWO MONSTROUS BODIES EMBALMED IN ICE . . .

"She's still alive?" Somehow, he had left the female out of his calculations.

Wordlessly, the monster fished in his windcheater and pulled out a wallet. From the wallet he produced a hologram which he flipped at Barron. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Taken at home a few weeks ago. Isn't she cute?"

A terrifying female of unshapely proportions stood under a flowering catalpa, arms folded under her bosom. Barron remembered the difficulty he had had matching breasts. She wore a blonde wig. Her lipsticked mouth smiled at the camera.

"Charming . . ." Barron said, shivering. He handed the photograph back.

"Where exactly is your place, *Daryll*?"

"Find out."

"Sorry . . ."

"Look, Barron, my marriage is going to fall apart unless you can provide me with the wherewithal."

"You're asking for miracles. . . ."

"I'm asking for practicalities." The monster stood up. Barron sat down. "I'll give you a week, just one week, to get everything together. Then I'll be back. *With* my mate, to see you do nothing to me you shouldn't while I'm under anaesthesia. Okay? One week. Find me a big one, too. No use trying to run off as you did in Switzerland—I'll be watching. Okay?"

"Fine. But how . . . where . . . ?"

"That's up to you. You're going to do me a penis transplant next week—and you're going to be the donor, if you can't come up with anything better." The enormous figure had moved to the door. There

it paused and looked grimly back, fixing Barron with its dead eyes. "And another thing. I'd prefer acupuncture anaesthesia to a general anaesthetic." It was gone.

Barron ran to the window, watching through the slats of the blind as the giant figure lumbered away in the moonlight. An owl hooted in horror.

When dawn came, it found Vic Barron bleary-eyed and with gastric sensations in his stomach. Throughout a sleepless night, he had several times pressed the muzzle of his automatic to his temple, but never summoned enough courage to squeeze the trigger.

Why had he not shot the monster when it stood before him? He sneered away his own pretence that compassion had stayed his hand, or at least his finger; he had simply had no faith in puny bullets stopping that great animated corpse. . . .

He spooned some breakfast cereal into his mouth. A week . . . But where could he find the equipment the monster—*Daryll*—demanded? It meant more visits to morgues, as in the bad old days. He sighed. He had been so enjoying a quiet immortality. Now he spent hours suffering, thinking in circles to no effect, like a Flat Earther who has just won a round-the-world cruise.

Cautiously, looking behind every bush, Barron took a walk around his lawn. The weather was chill, but not frosty. A bird chirped from a tree. California was growing too cool for his old bones; he would soon have to move down into Mexico. Or Rio, maybe. He liked cities. The bird fluttered to another bough, a bundle of white with a black back, and black-and-white wing feathers. Before anything else, though, the problem . . . unsolved despite the centuries . . . of getting rid of his adversary.

My God! He looked again for the bird, but it had gone. It couldn't be. No, he was pretty sure it was a snow bunting. Snow buntings in L.A.? Things were more serious than he thought. Soon all the delicate trees would be dying, as the palms had already died. The jacarandas, the flowering catalpas.

The flowering catalpas . . .

He stood in the middle of the grass, mouth open, staring out towards the ocean.

He suddenly knew where Codename *Daryll* lived. First the creature had said he lived just down the street. Only people in the media could afford Canyon Drive. Then there was the hologram of the terrifying female, with a catalpa flowering in the background. Only one catalpa, to his certain knowledge, grew in the Drive. That was

at 1105, back in the canyon, where he had often admired its lofty blossoms. He knew where to find his adversary.

Barron spent a pleasant morning down in Anaheim, buying grenades.

He squatted under oleanders, alert and watching. The garage of number 1105 was open, forlorn and bereft of automobile. The ranch-type house in white clapboard lay silent, the solar panels on its shingle roof reflecting grey overcast. Nobody moved in grounds or house. The catalpa had lost its blossom.

Barron was about to go forward, when an animal emerged from the gardens of the next-door house, a property with a FOR SALE board up in the name of the local realtor. The animal was white with a bushy tail and inquisitive muzzle. It walked delicately across Daryll's grass and disappeared into the laurels.

An Arctic fox? In Long Beach? Either it had escaped from some local menagerie or it was time to put his property on the market too, and move south.

Tucking his knees up under him, he rose into a sprint position and ran across the open space to the rear of the house, on to an artificial stone verandah, keeping bent under window level. The grenades rattled at his waist.

A kitchen door opened and a woman appeared. She pointed a revolver at him in a business-like way. She was a big woman of strange proportions. Her mottled legs were solid, her haunches amazing under the stiff denim skirt. She wore a yellow wig and her lips were red. My God, he thought, even through his fright, I build well. They don't make 'em like that any more.

"Come along in," she said in a deep voice. From where Barron crouched, it sounded like an order. He rose slowly, allowing himself to be directed by the articulate gun into the house.

Grinning, she followed and closed the door behind her. "The grounds are scanned. I've been watching you for minutes, honey."

The form of address shocked Barron almost as much as the revolver. Drawing himself up proudly, he said, "In case you don't recognise me, you address me as Master."

"That crap may be good enough for Daryll, honey, but I don't acknowledge no man my master. Take a seat. Let's look at you. You weathered well."

She prowled heavily around him as he sank uneasily into a chair. He regarded her as eagerly as she regarded him. A turtle-neck sweater concealed the scars he remembered at her throat; his stitch-

ing, he had to admit, had not been expert, though practice had meant he did a better job on her than on—Daryll. Her breasts, too, appeared to match in shape and size; the hologram had simply caught her in an awkward stance on sloping ground.

"The wig doesn't do a thing for you," he said, severely. "Hasn't your own hair grown again? It was dark. The original lady was Italian by birth . . . Contessa—Contessa Polidori, if I remember that far back."

She put a hand to her mouth, letting the gun droop. "I didn't know that. Daryll didn't tell me that. A Contessa, eh? Oh, wow, royal blood in my veins . . ."

"Just in the head . . ."

She dropped the gun and ran from the room, lissom as falling timber. Barron got up and pocketed the gun. He walked about, wishing he had his pills. What an extraordinary situation to find oneself in. Well, he was a lonely man. No relations left. In a way, these two . . . no, that was absurd. He had no progeny, except his ideas, which had gone forth into the world.

The woman returned, rather bashful. She had thrown a shawl over the muscular plateau of her shoulders, and the wig had gone. In its place was a rich crop of raven hair, trimmed short. When she tossed her head playfully at him, the hair rippled like cactus under the breath of a sirocco.

"Why, that's much better. Lovely!"

"You think so?" She dropped into a chair, which creaked but held, and crossed herculean legs. "Listen, you can call me Elizabeth, and I'll call you Vic. I watch all your TV shows, know that?"

"I christened you Eve."

"Too corny. Elizabeth it is, and has been ever since we escaped from that goddam glacier. We hadn't got a nickel to our name, whatever our name was then. Now we have some rackets going, to try to feel a bit secure, money-wise. Daryll works real hard but you know he is such a creep. . . ."

She smiled again, inviting him into the conversation, but he would not play.

"He's threatening me." Barron heard the whine in his own voice.

"He's threatening *you*? Listen, he threatens *me* all the time. Not a nice guy to live with. All I want to do is settle down, but he's always chasing skirt. Pathetic. It's obvious why he does it, of course. His old problem. No wherewithal. Impotence fears—well justified in his case. Why else would a guy his age be chasing starlets, for Chrissake."

He sat down opposite her and gnawed his lip. It tasted unpleasant. "I have a week to solve his problem. I'm in trouble. He'll kill me."

"Sure he'll kill you. It's your fault in the first place. How come you forgot that vital part?"

Sighing, he said, "I can't go through all that again. I didn't expect he'd—well, that he was viable. . . ."

Elizabeth regarded him suspiciously. "Oh yes? Well, I think there's more to it than that, that's my conjecture. You had your own hang-ups at the time, the way you behaved with your fiancée, and I've read books on human psychology. I figure you thought that a guy without sex organs wouldn't have sex problems. Only a real jerk could be so stupid."

Unhappy at the turn of the conversation, Barron thought of pulling the gun out and shooting her; but the symbolism would have been too obvious.

"All that was before the days of Freud," he said. "I'm feeling faint. Do you have a lager in the icebox, Elizabeth?"

"Tits, I should have offered you one." She rose as majestically as a mushroom cloud. He got up and walked about to banish his faintness. A door was open into a side room. He looked through into a smartly furnished bedroom. In the window stood a large cage containing a pair of white birds, flitting from perch to perch.

Elizabeth came back with two lagers and they drank.

"He'll be back soon." She glanced at the watch on her python-thick wrist.

"I must go—fast."

"You'll stay here. You have to do what he says—just this one thing for us, then we leave you alone, right? Look, Vic, I want to settle down, have kids. Be an ordinary mother." She went dreamy, and reached out for his hand. "I daydream of having a little girl of my own. Mary. I'd call her Mary. . . . Why not take your grenades off and relax, Vic?"

Not liking the way she sidled up against him, since he came only to her shoulder, he said, rather desperately, "I see you have a pair of snow buntings in your bedroom."

Immediately the sentence was out, he knew it was a mistake. She gazed down at him with the light of misunderstanding in her eyes. "Come on through and see them, baby."

He was almost dragged into the bedroom. She closed the door behind her. He made a dash for the bird-cage, circling it to avoid her embrace.

"Where did you get these birds?"

She stopped. Her head went on one side in enquiry, like a falling gravestone. "Ha. I caught them myself in the yard. Cute, aren't they?"

"They're snow buntings."

"That's right. They're rare in these parts. They used to nest only in the Arctic Circle. Finding them here is a sure sign of the encroaching ice age. If I were you, I'd sell up and move south before the glaciers get here—after you've fixed Daryll with the necessary."

Still avoiding her manoeuvres, conducted with all the controlled grace of a rudderless supertanker, he inserted a hand in the cage and drew forth a cheeping handful of snow bunting. From an inner pocket, he produced a powerful magnifying glass, which he screwed into his eye.

Ruffling through the captive's plumage, he gave a triumphant exclamation.

"A flea under its left wing. Good." After a moment, he said, "Yes, I see. It's a *Ceratophyllus rusticus*, known as a house-martin flea. A male. Very significant."

Seeing that she was immobilised with interest, he added, "Snow buntings in their natural habitat suffer from a different species of flea. This flea, the male *Ceratophyllus rusticus*, has almost certainly been picked up in the nest, shortly after the bunting was hatched. The flea would not survive in the arctic conditions essential to snow bunting breeding. Therefore, these birds have been reared within the natural habitat of the flea, near here, *artificially*."

She evaded his gaze. It was her turn to gnaw her lower lip. He found himself wondering how it tasted.

"How do you know it is a male flea?" she asked.

Putting the bird back in the cage and releasing it, he said, with a laugh, "Oh, no doubt about that. You tell both the sex and the species of the flea by its penis or lack of it. Did you know that the penis of the flea is a structure of most astonishing complexity?"

"Is that a fact?" she breathed, patting her hair.

"The genitalia of female fleas are much less complicated, although they also have amazing properties. For instance, they can store male sperm—male flea sperm I mean, of course—and release it at intervals, as her eggs ripen. Thus, she is able to lay fertilized eggs for as long as two months after copulation."

"Amazing . . . Two months after copulation. Two whole months after copulation . . ." Elizabeth went and sat on the bed. Barron followed her, still explaining.

"You see, the female flea has a little internal organ called the

spermatheca which stores sperm."

"Stores sperm . . ."

"Yes, it is shaped like a flask with a thick neck. It varies slightly in shape according to the species."

"Aren't fleas just wonderful, Vic? You know so much about their intimate habits."

He sat down on the bed beside her, resting an elbow on her spectacular hip.

"Bird fleas only copulate when the host is sitting on the nest. They require extra warmth before they can show any interest in the other sex."

"Oh, that's so profoundly true," she said raptly. "Tell me more about the male organ, honey."

"It is the most complex genital organ recorded on any insect, and very large in proportion to the size of the body. How it evolved we are at a loss to understand."

"Oh, constant practice, I don't doubt."

They huddled together dreamily. He was wondering if with any luck she might fall asleep, allowing him to tiptoe away, when she said, without any appreciable change in the tone of her gravelly voice, "You better give me my gun back now, honey, just as a token of good faith."

He handed it over. She kissed him.

"Just to show my good faith, honey, I'll let you into a little secret. About the snow buntings. Since you're such a great botanist. Darryl would kill me if he knew I'd talked. . . . Okay, so there's another ice age on the way, but our little racket is to get snow buntings and snowy owls and let 'em loose in residential areas. A pal of ours in Sacramento breeds them on a big scale—this pair of birds is part of his recent delivery. We free them; people get scared, head south; we buy up their property for peanuts, sell dear to the Canadians heading southwards from British Columbia."

"But I saw an Arctic fox in your garden. . . ."

"Arctic foxes are too tricky to breed. Not like the birds. We catch ordinary foxes and dye 'em white. Unfortunately, the dye wears off. It's difficult to obtain good dye."

Vic shook his head. "What an underhand approach to real estate."

"You ever heard of an honest realtor?"

He lay back on the bed, stunned by her revelations. Again the light of misunderstanding in her eyes. She flung herself upon his prostrate form and kissed him passionately.

"Come on, give out, honey, to your sexy old Italian sweetheart."

If it's good enough for fleas, it's good enough for a saucy old semi-contessa. . . ."

"Uh, uh . . ." He struggled wildly. "In the case of the fleas, the female sex is stronger and bigger than the male. Also, she assumes the active role in the mating."

"Now you're talking. . . ." She started to tear his clothes off, laughing like a banshee.

"Oh, oh, Liz, come on, you're tickling . . . oh, you're tickling me, you hulking great darling, oh . . ."

They both became somewhat inarticulate as the garments went. Even the sudden chirruping of the snow buntings failed to warn them. The bedroom door burst open; and there stood Daryll, his face ashen with wrath like a volcano in a tropical downpour.

Aghast, Barron tried to cover his nudity.

"Okay, Barron—I'm going to be in charge of that instrument from now on," Daryll roared. As he dashed forward, Elizabeth grabbed the gun from the bed cover and fired.

The sound reverberated round the room. The caged birds died of fright. Dazed, Barron crouched on the bed, wrapping an arm instinctively round the giant female. Daryll reeled, flinging his arms out in a Karloff-like gesture, to maintain his balance. Though his left ear, which had never been very secure, was blown off, he paused only for a moment. Then he came on.

Without being fully conscious of what he did, Barron grabbed his belt, priming one of the grenades. He threw it. Snarling, Daryll put out a hand and caught it. He brought it up to his face and glared at it. It exploded.

Smoke and flying fragments filled the room. Dust flew. Part of the ceiling fell in. The bedroom door collapsed, followed more slowly by the outer wall and the best part of the living room. Rubble kept tumbling for what seemed the best part of an hour, burying the body of the monster.

The pair on the bed sneezed violently.

As the clouds of dust settled, they saw they had a beautiful view of the garden through the gap in the fabric. The catalpa tree was bathed in pale sun.

"Honey, I'm a widow! Kiss me!" screamed Elizabeth. Shingles cascaded to the floor.

Some things were meant to be.

They made love while the world fell slowly apart.

ISLE BE SEEING YOU

by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

Mr. MacIntyre tells us that Bernadette Beetroot is *not* a parody of Ferdinand Feghoot. Bernadette Beetroot is instead a parody of Mr. Randall Garrett's creation, Benedict Breadfruit. It is Benedict Breadfruit who is a parody of Ferdinand Feghoot. Mr. MacIntyre trusts that this makes everything clear.

After reading about Mr. Ted Reynold's archipelagoes and encountering Mr. Grendel Briarton's puns in this magazine so often, Mr. MacIntyre has decided to *Take Matters Into His Own Hands*, and here presents what he hopes will be the Last Word on both subjects.

"I can't possibly explain it," said the governor of Alaska to Bernadette Beetroot, world-famous detective and internationally renowned criminologist. "An island appeared out of nowhere in the Bering Straits just last week. Aviators flying overhead can see the island. Sailors passing on shipboard see it. The island registers on all radar, sonar, and seismographic equipment. Camera crews have taken pictures of the island; so have holographic-laser operators and Kirlian photographers. Yet the fact remains that the island doesn't exist!"

Bernadette Beetroot smoked her calabash and said nothing.

"If anybody gets within one kilometer of the island," continued the governor of Alaska, "it simply *vanishes!* Boats and hydroplanes reaching the spot find only empty ocean. But when they leave again, and look back, the crews see the island reappear."

Bernadette Beetroot took the pipe out of her mouth and adjusted her deer-stalker cap. "And you say that this island materialized within the chain of islands that form an archipelago stretching from Alaska to Siberia?"

"Yes, of course! But . . ."

"Well, there's your answer," said the world's most brilliant sleuth. "You can see the island but it doesn't really exist. That's because it's merely an *optical Aleutian!*"

AMY, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS

by John M. Ford

art: Linda Attley

Mr. Ford—called 'Mike' by his friends—is the author of Princes of the Air, from Timescape Books, and co-author of On Writing Science Fiction, from Owlswick Press.

Warnke was braced for the shock of transfer, but it always hit harder than he could take. Pain ripped like a gutting knife from his crotch up into his chest, and his skull rang with chain explosions. His legs buckled, and his back hit something hard. His arms were no use at all. He opened his eyes and was white-blind, the light veined bloody red. For a moment he thought he'd reached too far this time, over four hundred years, when he'd never before transferred more than two centuries—this time he'd gone fatally too far.

Then he told himself the truth, that every transfer was like this; he just kept forgetting, deliberately. The pain was strong, but the desire to forget was stronger. And once he knew that he wasn't dead, instantly he thought of the woman he'd transferred to see; hoped, desperately, that Amy Dudley was upstairs. The transfer shock would only last for a few seconds, and he didn't want her to see him blind and helpless on the floor. If she ran from him, if she wouldn't listen, all the pain would be wasted. His and hers.

Warnke insisted to himself for at least the millionth time that it was not already all a waste. There were answers. There must be. In the right place, the right time.

The blinding whiteness faded, then the tremors, then the head-



ache; he got up slowly from the hardwood floor. He was in the hall of Cumnor Place, the Berkshire manor where Amy Robsart Dudley lived in this Year of Grace 1560. The hard white light of a September afternoon came through leaded panes, falling on the parquet, an armoire carved with Crusaders, a long, bare hall table with two chairs. Warnke's movements in his black cloak made dust dance in the angled light; otherwise all was very still. He wondered if he had cried out, on the floor. If she had heard.

Warnke rested a hand on a massive, carved newel post. The hall staircase was of polished oak; it rose gently, turned at a landing, rose again to the upper gallery, where Amy's rooms were. *Down a payre of staires*, said the record. Here was the pair. Here he was. He had never yet missed a place or a time prepared for. He waited for her.

He stared up, at the bright west window on the landing. Stared, trying to think; but his thoughts were blank until, with a rustle of crisp fabric, she eclipsed the light.

"I do not know you, sir," said the silhouette, in a brittle voice: not angry, not afraid, but threatening to crack. "If you are seeking my husband, he is at Windsor."

Warnke swept back his cloak, exposing a plain dark suit with a white ruffled shirt; nothing like the fashion but passable as a foreigner's clothes. He turned slightly, careful to show that he wore no sword. He bowed, not well; the cloak interfered. He was no good at costumes. "Not your husband, Lady Dudley. I have come to speak with you."

She took a step, to the edge of the landing, but he still could not see her clearly for the light. "I am not receiving today." A step, down. "You seem to have admitted yourself. Will you let yourself out . . . or shall I call the servants to assist you?"

"There are no servants," Warnke said, too quickly. "You've sent them all to Abingdon Fair, and they won't be back until sunset."

Another step. The hem of her dress was blue. "Are you certain, sir?"

"Yes, madam. You were insistent; and then Mrs. Owen stayed, and dined with you; but she's in another part of the house. We are alone."

Another step, and he heard her breathe in sharply. Her hand on the bannister was pale as paper. "How improper, for a married woman to be alone with a man, while her husband is far away." She kept walking. "The lascivious French will be talking of it."

She wasn't frightened of him. Not yet, anyway. And she had a

sense of humor, even if it was a bitter one. While Lady Dudley was at Cumnor, Lord Robert Dudley was a day's journey away at Windsor, with Queen Elizabeth I. Closeted with her, while England's affairs waited. And the French did talk of it. As did the Spaniards. And the English.

Warnke said, "I have something to tell you, madam. Two things: one terrible and one hopeful."

"You are a messenger, then? You seemed a fine spy." She reached the bottom of the staircase. Lace wrapped her throat up to the chin. Her face was gaunt, hollow-eyed. Her hair was covered by a cap; what he could see of it was dry and brittle-looking. In Warnke's search for the facts in the case of Amy Robsart, as he tried to locate her in spacetime, he had never unearthed her portrait. He knew why. She was twenty-eight years old, and looked past forty. She looked like death was gnawing her bones. Which it was.

"Terrible news, and hopeful," she said thoughtfully. "What could that be? I know. My husband has at last gotten the Queen with child, as the gossips say; but I shall die before Her Majesty's confinement."

"No, madam." Warnke felt a chill; she'd cut too close, too soon. "There is no such child."

"I know. My lord is a lover, true—importunate, true . . . even foolish. But a fool is one thing and a madman is another." She inclined her head, and Warnke was cold again, for the angle of her neck.

"You know my name, sir, but you have not told me yours."

"Saul Warnke, Lady Dudley." He started to bow again but did not go very far.

"You are not English."

"No. German." It was not entirely a lie.

"And your terrible news?"

"Of your . . . disease, madam."

She looked down at herself, raised a hand as if to pluck at her left breast, but instead touched the fingertips to her lips. "You are a doctor, then?"

"Not a physician. A doctor of . . . science." *Philosophy* had the wrong connotations, now. *Biophysics* had none at all.

"And the news is terrible. I must, then, be dying. Is that so, Doctor?"

"It is so, my Lady."

She nodded slowly. "I am sorry you have come so far for so little," she said, without inflection. "I know I am dying, Doctor . . . Warnke. All England knows that I am dying." She looked straight at him.

AMY, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS

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"And they wish that I would not be so slow about it." A hand fluttered, a dismissal, as to a servant. "And now, Doctor, today I wish no company, as you seem already to know. I would you left me to this day's dying alone." She walked toward the hall door, giving Warnke a wide berth, reaching for the handle.

He said, "I know the day, madam."

She stopped, moved on. "The . . . day? It is Sunday, Doctor."

"You know my meaning, madam."

She stopped still. "Surely . . . that knowledge is not given even to the wise doctors of Germany."

"To me it is," Warnke said unsteadily. Now was the time for fear, for flight. The door was near. "Today, Lady Dudley. Today is the day."

She recoiled, her eyes wide and white in their dark sockets. "You *are* the angel of death," she said, looking him up and down, "but it is not God who has sent you. Not God but Elizabeth." Warnke took a step toward her, his hands held out empty; she backed farther away, and quickly sidestepped, putting the table between them. "Her father Henry had a way with inconvenient wives," she said. "For one he brought a French swordsman; why then not a German doctor?"

"Not Queen Elizabeth," Warnke said; afraid to speak too suddenly.

"No? Then which of her many busy hands? I hear that William Cecil is out of favor. Does he return in the poison bag of a German doctor?"

"No, madam." He knew she must stop herself; he could not.

"Not Elizabeth, nor Master Cecil." Her eyes were haunted.

"Then—" A hand flew to her throat. "Not Robert—not my husband."

Warnke shook his head violently. "Lady Dudley, I swear that I have not come to kill you."

"*Then who has?*" she said furiously, turned from him and shouted "*Mrs. Owen!*"

"No one, madam—the cancer, madam. Please listen. The cancer—you know it is advanced—"

She had her mouth open to call out again, but instead turned back to Warnke and said, "It does . . . somewhat pain me." Her look had already told him so, more than somewhat.

"The malady has invaded your spine, my lady. Silently, but the bones are much weakened. Very soon—this afternoon, madam—the bones will break."

She stared at him. "Messenger, spy, doctor, murderer—and now you speak like a prophet, though you dress like the Devil—" Sud-

denly, with trembling fingers, she crossed herself. "Are you a man at all?"

He made the sign himself. "Only a man, my lady . . . one given some knowledge of the future." His throat tightened, and he coughed. "I would tell you . . . what will come . . . after your death."

"You would *what*?" She leaned slightly forward, over the table. "If you come to kill me, do it for Elizabeth and England and have done. But tell me no stories of afterward, whether of Heaven or Hell." She crossed her arms delicately, walked halfway around the table. Very wearily, she said, "What can it matter?"

"It does matter," Warnke said, his heart burning; he had come this far, and she was still listening. "What happens here today will change the world. I've come because I want you to know . . . how much it does matter. Will you hear me?"

Her hands massaged her elbows. Warnke waited: he did not care if she thought he was a prophet, a messenger of God or Elizabeth I, or of Satan himself, as long as she would listen to him.

"Very well, Doctor." She pulled a chair away from the table. "I will sit. You shall stand."

Warnke nodded. Amy sat, expertly controlling her skirts and sleeves. Her husband might be the Queen's favorite, but she was mistress of this house.

This empty house.

"Tonight at sunset," Warnke said, "when the servants return from Abingdon Fair, they will find your . . . you, madam, at the bottom of the stairs . . . with your neck . . . broken."

"At the bottom of the stairs?" she said, calm and thoughtful again. "Now that will fill the air with rumors."

"Yes, madam, it will. Though a court will find no evidence of foul play, the shadow will be cast. It will be said that your husband had you killed, that Cecil did, that Elizabeth did. That you were found with nails driven into your head. That you were poisoned. A book will be written, and prove most popular, that portrays you thrown bodily down those stairs by Anthony Forster."

"Forster—! Who would write such a thing?" She shook her head slightly. "No matter—I know, I know."

"That will not be for some years." No point in adding that almost as many readers would accept Sir Walter Scott's picture of Amy's death as would believe in his Robin Hood. And no use to say that a note from Dudley to Cecil, asking for some unnamed assistance, would be held ever after as Amy's death warrant.

She said, "And this—you say—will change the world."

They were at the heart of it now. He had made her listen. Now if she would only understand. "You know that, if he were . . . free . . . Lord Robert Dudley would marry the Queen?"

She nodded, very stiffly. "Whether they would bow to him or not . . . And he will, then. And the—world—"

"No, madam. Because of the . . . circumstances, your death will not free him. In time, he will marry again, but he will not wed Elizabeth." Warnke rested his hands on the table. They were wet. "No one will ever wed Elizabeth Tudor, Lady Dudley. And as a result . . . she will be married to England. She will do great things, at home and abroad. As will your husband."

"*My widower*," she shot back. "Is this what you have come to tell me, Doctor? That England may be great if only poor Amy dies?" She stood up, wobbling. "You are a poisoner, Doctor, whoever sent you. Your tongue is pure poison." She started toward the stairs, held still. "What if," she said, very softly, "I did not die at the bottom of these stairs? What if I died in my bed . . . casting no shadow?"

"Then I would move you," Warnke said miserably.

She whirled on him, horrified. "You *are* more than a prophet, then."

"I—no—but . . ." Warnke clutched a fist within another. "It's far from blind faith, my lady. I've tried to change facts. I've tried more times than I can count. But I can't change a single thing. The past is fixed."

"*The past.*"

"I meant—" *It can't matter . . . can it.* "Yes, my lady. The past. I'm not a seer. I'm a . . . traveler. From one time to another. Do you understand? I know when you'll die, and where, and how, because it's all written down in a history book. I wish I could save your life, I swear by God and every saint I do. But I can't save you, no matter how hard I try—because I *didn't*."

Amy had a vacant look. "You . . . traveled, from another time, to tell me that I must die."

"To tell you *why*," Warnke said, pleading. "You must see the difference."

She shut her eyes. "I do see," she said evenly. "Is it in your history book that my husband was imprisoned in the Tower, under sentence of death?"

"Yes, madam. For the plot to put Lady Grey on the throne."

"I visited Robert . . . every week he was in that terrible place. Most days he was strong—my lord is not wise, but he is very strong—but there were times when the stone walls were too much

for him, and he would ask me, 'Why? Why am I here, Amy?' And I could not tell him that he was there because there were plots, and for their failure he must die. Even though he knew it very well.

"I think that is why he has trusted me. Always. Because to the day Elizabeth spared his head, he asked me why it must fall . . . and I did not answer." She looked at the floor, hard-eyed, dry-eyed.

"I'm sorry," Warnke whispered. "I'm so sorry—"

"Don't be," she said. "Not unless there's a pardon for me. And there's not, is there, except our Lord's pardon to us all. . . . My offense is not one Elizabeth Tudor can absolve."

They were both quite silent then. Warnke thought about stone walls, and reasons why, and transference.

For reasons he could no longer remember, Warnke had once told a psychiatrist about his power. The doctor asked him to transfer then and there, from his seat on the couch; it had been hellish, without time to properly fix a target, but he'd done it anyway.

And come out of shock in a room with concrete walls; a bunker, *the* bunker, with Adolf Hitler and his wife of a few hours Eva Braun standing there all ready to commit *Gottterdammerung*.

Hitler believed in Warnke and his power at once. What the Hell, he'd believed in everything; even, finally, defeat. He asked the *Herr Doktor* with the good German name what the future held. And Warnke, conscious more of the loaded gun than the man who held it, told him the truth: that Germany was not doomed, would rise again, astonish the world again.

Adolf and Eva died the happiest newlyweds Warnke had ever seen. He transferred back hoping that the pain would be strong enough to wipe out the memory.

But he did remember, and told the frowning doctor. And discovered that, from the psychiatrist's viewpoint, Saul Warnke hadn't gone anywhere, let alone anywhen; hadn't done anything but "self-induce a remarkable physical seizure and delusional state." Warnke was lucky not to leave in a strait-jacket. Never again did he speak of the power—in his own time.

He could not prove to anyone that the transfers were real. He could not prove to himself that they were not. And if transfer—the pain, the light, the manor hall, Amy—was not real, then what *was* real? He might be dead, or in Hell, or comatose on the floor of a padded cell.

Warnke's hands twitched, his knuckles rapping the table with a clear sound of solid wood. Amy looked up, startled. *It comes to nothing*, Warnke thought, *reality or delusion. She is, we are, here, where*

ever here is.

She said "Doctor . . . will you tell me where I must stand?" She moved closer to the stairs. "Here?"

"I think that will be all right," Warnke said, having no idea.

She looked up to the landing. The light through the window was turning golden with evening. "You say that my lord Robert will do great things."

"He will be made Earl of Leicester."

"That will please him very much . . . and he will marry again. Then the suspicions will be lifted from him, in time? This . . . malady that breaks necks . . . it will finally be blamed, and not Robert Dudley?"

"Yes, madam . . . in some time."

"But within his life, surely."

"No, madam. There will be the book, as I told you . . ."

She turned back quickly. Her head trembled. "Yes, the book. How much time, Doctor? How long to clear my lord's name?"

"There will always be many who think him innocent—" Her look stopped him. "Four . . . centuries, madam."

"Four centuries?" she gasped. She shook her head, not looking at him, her mouth open. "In four hundred years, what's left of a name to cleanse? Who will care that he was ever innocent? Who will care about any of us, poor dead lady, poor dead gentleman, poor dead Queen?"

"The world . . . loves a mystery, my lady."

"*Death's a mystery*," she said, and leaned against the newel post, eyes tight shut, left hand clawed at the back of her neck. She breathed shallowly and fast for a few moments, then, in a very controlled voice, said, "How far would you carry me, Doctor, supposing I did not fall here? Would you drag me from the end of the long gallery above? If I were in my nightdress, or my shift, or stark naked, would you dress me, like a doll?" She tugged at her collar lace.

"Please, madam—"

"Why 'please'? Aren't you sufficiently strong?" Her eyes burned into him. "If you are, then help me. Help me to the stables, and find a horseshoe to print my head. Help me to a high window, and open it for me." She smiled, sadly, sadly. "Help me to bed, and together let's confound all destiny."

Warnke backed away, biting his hand.

She said, "I was beautiful once. Sickly, but beautiful. Do you believe that I could ever have been beautiful, Doctor Germanicus?"

"Yes, madam," Warnke whispered.

She nodded, relaxing a little. "I did want to hear someone say that, before I died." She looked upward again, and again Warnke feared for the corrupted bones. "There was a marriage bed once . . . but there have been so many houses between us, I don't know where it is now. Or if I'd recognize it if I lay in it. But I did want to hear that said." A pause. "And you say that the Queen will never . . . marry."

"No, madam."

"Not even for a night?"

"That is what will be said."

She laughed dryly. "We're a fine triangle, then, aren't we? A corpse, a virgin, and a rake suspected of them both."

Please, Warnke thought, tell me how you can laugh. Three hundred years from now, Amy's ghost would still be walking Cumnor Place. Seven priests together would fail to exorcise her. The citizens of Cumnor would finally tear the manor down without ever defeating the spirit within.

I'll give you all the future, any answer, any reason I can give, if only you'll tell me how. Four centuries, for just one day of eternity.

Was that all he'd wanted, really, from any of those he'd met . . . even Hitler? Warnke supposed that it was not quite all. There remained those questions that one could no more ask than see the back of one's head, or see the thoughts in the tissue of brain within.

But even if the question could not be formed, maybe there was still an answer. It was just a matter of being present when the answer showed itself. Just a matter of preparedness. Just a matter of Time.

Amy took a few steps in a random direction, away from the stairs; crossed her arms before her breasts. She spoke deliberately. "We are married ten years and a season now, Robert and I. . . . In that time I have tended the affairs of his houses, traveled up and down to town and fair, sold wool at a good Christian profit, and written letters telling my lord how fared his property." She looked up at the window, looked back. "And in that same time my husband has tended the Queen's horses, marched her soldiers, kept her counsel . . . and been as faithless as a stray cat who loves you only for its saucer of milk." Her arms tightened across her chest, squeezing hard, and agony radiated from her in waves. "*But the saucer's empty, and there's no more milk to give!*"

She let her arms fall, took a breath, shuddered. Her eyes were still dry. Warnke moved toward her, but she made no motion in

response; perhaps, he thought, the pain had been stronger than the memory.

"Doctor Warnke," she whispered, then her voice rose slightly: "Will you let me walk upstairs, just halfway? I would see the sunset through the window."

"Of course," he said, and guided her hand to the bannister. She ascended, and he did not follow. He had no wish to be present at the absolute end; of all the places where the courage to stare death down might be found, the last moments were the emptiest.

"It must have been a fine Fair day," she said. "The air is very clear." She turned away, half shadow. "I can see my servants' dust, down the road, Doctor. I think it is time I came down."

"Oh; yes," he said stupidly.

She paused, above the first step. "Do you know how much longer my husband will live, Doctor?"

He had to think for a moment. "Another thirty years, madam."

"And Elizabeth?"

"Forty-two."

"Then . . . will you go to them, before they die . . . and remind them of me? Of what I did for them . . . even if I had no choice?" She smiled.

Warnke swallowed hard. "Y-yes, madam." Amy took a step, lightly. "My Lady—" She paused again. Warnke said, "Your husband . . . never betrayed you with the Queen."

"I know that," she said. "We had letters. Always."

She continued down, and there was nothing weak or hesitant about her step; it was firm, stately . . . regal. Warnke could feel his heart racing, beating through the silk of his shirt. He wanted to speak, but his throat was shut tight.

Three steps from the floor, there was a sound like the snap of a green twig, like knuckles cracking; Amy's whole body spasmed cruelly, and she tumbled down the last of the stairs, landing with a thump on the parquet floor. She lay wholly still. She had lost a shoe, but her skirts were still arranged; her neck was skewed, but the hood still covered her hair. There were no nails, no poison, no Sir Walter Scott toss from above. Only the borer from within.

Warnke knelt beside her, listening for some last word, but there was nothing. She had told him all she would. Now if he could only draw out the answers. . . .

He had seen death after death, and still the dignity, the courage to meet it were secret from him; kept deathwatch after deathwatch, and still his own end was a faceless, lonely horror.

Amy had not died alone. Thanks to him. He wondered if it mattered.

His eyes ached; but he could not cry, because she had not. He bent his head back, the day's last light half-blinding him, and opened his mouth. No sound came out.

There was a movement overhead, cutting into the light. Only a flicker at the limit of his vision—but he saw the gloved hand, the blade of the knife.

Then they were gone, and he thought he heard soft, rapid footsteps. *Run to your Lord or your Lady. Collect your price for her neck. But do not tell the facts in the case; bury them, erase them, destroy them for all time.*

What do they matter?

Warnke shut his eyes tight and huddled into his cloak, hurrying to transfer, praying that the pain would at last be stronger than the truth.

HAIKU FOR SKYLAB

Lashed to no mast, the
siren songs of gravity
cast you home broken.

—Robert Frazier

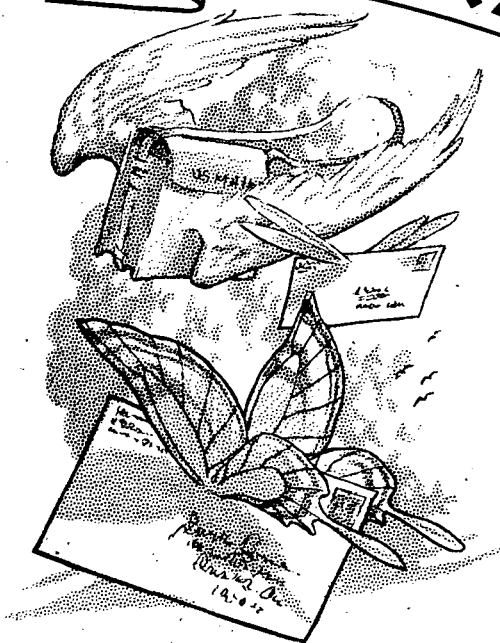
SECOND SOLUTION TO SFs AND Fs ON FIFTY-FIFTH STREET (from page 63)

There are fourteen Fs on the sign. If you don't believe it, go back and count more carefully. It's an entertaining test to try on friends. You'll be amazed by how few people find all the Fs on the first count.

UP, UP, & AWAY

by
Hugh
Brous

art:
George
Barr



Mr. Brous was born in Texas in time to be a member of the original cast of WWII. He's been in computers and data processing since before IBM had commercial hardware that could divide. In his spare time, he writes and plays the piccolo with the St. Clair Shores Symphony Orchestra. Astounding Science Fiction bought his first story to be published, back in 1956, and there have been a scattering of published stories since then. Currently, he tells us, he is working on fame, having given up on fortune.

Gently he settled his aching back and shoulders onto the leather couch and studied the doctor studying his card.

"Ah, Mr. Postal," the psychiatrist finally said, looking up.

"Postal is my job title," he corrected. "I deliver the mail."

"Ah, yes, here it is," the doctor said, adjusting his glasses and looking at the card again. "Yes, Mr. Peter Perkins, Postal Person. Now Mr. Perkins, were you delivering the mail when you—ah—attempted to jump over that bus?"

"Not really. I'd finished the route and was starting back to the P.O."

"And did this bus appear to be in your way as you were returning to the Post Office?"

"Well, sorta. But the real problem was the dogs. There's a pack of mongrels on my route that think I'm lunch."

"And they attacked you?"

"That was their idea, so I tried to fly away."

"You tried to fly?"

"Well, not exactly flying. I just ran as hard as I could down that ragged sidewalk, gliding over the broken spots and the junk that's scattered around."

"And you were going to glide over that bus? Tell me about it."

"Those dogs had me scared out of my wits. And coming down that street I had been soaring over things in my way. I guess I figured that I could soar over that bus too. I took a flying leap and hit it about halfway up. It was all dreamlike."

"It was like a dream?"

"Not *a* dream, but *the* dream."

"Tell me about your dream."

Peter Perkins looked at the slush-covered street and the ice-filled water slopping up out of the gutter and over the curb. He took a couple of cautious running steps, tucked up his feet, and glided smoothly over the intersection. With a certain shoulder motion he had perfected, he kept himself airborne until he was over a dry and ice-free patch of sidewalk on the other side.

His first stop was the old Bradley home, a big ramshackle frame structure from the McKinley era. He launched himself into another glide that carried him over the ice-covered walk and broken steps. Old Mr. Bradley was waiting at the door for him.

"Morning, Pete," he said. "Treacherous day to be out, isn't it?"

"Could be worse," Perkins said, making a soft landing on the porch. "But there is a scattering of dry spots to land on."

"You're still young enough for that sort of sport. My old legs and shoulders won't take it any more."

"Aw, you're not so old, Mr. Bradley," Pete said, handing him a few pieces of mail. "Mostly junk, I think."

"Better than bills," the old man said, closing the door.

No argument there, Pete thought as he leaped the porch bannister and sailed over the separating hedge into the neighbor's yard.

At the end of the block Pete cut through the driveway of the last house to the back of the lot. Near the garage he took a running leap and soared up toward the high uncut hedge along the lot line. He was airborne before he saw the power lines. Coated with ice, they sagged to within a foot or two of the top of the hedge.

"Get up," he told himself. "Get up."

An echo somewhere called, "Get up, get up."

He worked his shoulders frantically for the needed extra inches. He almost made it.

The toe of his right boot hooked a wire. He felt himself twisting and falling. He landed on his head and shoulders, his feet tangled up over him in the hedge. Lightning flashed behind his eyeballs.

Somewhere in the distance a voice still called, "Get up."

With his eyes closed he waited for the world to quit reeling. He tried pulling his feet free, but they were snagged in the branches. The voice was louder now, more insistent. He opened his eyes.

His wife's slippers and the hem of her robe were inches from his face.

"Get up, you lazy bum," she scolded. "I'm not going to call you again."

Perkins lay on the bedroom floor, his feet tangled in the covers on his bed.

"Ah, Mr. Postal," the doctor said.

"Perkins," Perkins corrected, settling his tired and aching shoulders onto the leather couch.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Perkins." The doctor shuffled some file folders, finally opening one and speaking again. "Well," he said after reading a few lines, "it seems it was a two-story building this time."

"It was only about a story and a half."

"And you were going to jump over it?"

"At the time I guess I thought I could."

"Hmmm," the doctor hummed. "Now Mr. Perkins, when did you first have this strong urge to fly?"

"When I started delivering the mail."

"And is that when the dreams started?"

"Yeah, about. After spending a day stumbling over things and getting my shins banged and my share of dog bites I go to bed at night and dream of getting up in the air and away from it all."

"Ah, yes. And do you always dream of flying?"

"Mostly. And a funny thing, when I get up in the morning I am tireder sometimes than when I went to bed. And my shoulders ache."

"Curious," the doctor said. "Now tell me about your attempted leap over this building."

"Well, it's a big flat box of a warehouse that covers half the block. I have to walk around it and all the trucks in the street to get to the houses on the other side. I guess I was going to take a short cut."

"And you felt you could leap that high and glide that far?"

"Well, it was a little more than just jumping and gliding."

"In what sense was it more than jumping and gliding?"

"It was more like really flying, like I had wings. It was all dream-like until I smashed up against the side of that warehouse."

"It was like in your dreams?"

"Yeah. I have wings in my dreams now, and I can flap them and fly over everything, the dogs, the kids, the . . ."

"Tell me about these dreams with wings."

Peter Perkins leaned into the wind and fell off the top balcony of Condotowers, the last stop on his route. Spreading his wings, he went into a shallow glide that carried him over the lush green of the park spaces between the buildings. On the clean tile walkways he could see the larger children running and beating their immature wings exuberantly. The tiny ones pedalled their flycycles furiously in pursuit. At the edge of the park he sideslipped slightly to avoid the mother blue jay who would have challenged his air space. Then working his wings with strong, even strokes, he climbed to altitude for the peaceful flight back to the Post Office.

His supervisor was waiting for him when he touched down on the Post Office roof flyway. He didn't like the way the super's feathers were ruffled up behind his neck.

"Dodo, you did it again. You left this month's *TiLiFort* behind." Perkins looked unhappily at the pile of magazines at the super's feet.

"My wings are tired. I'll take them out tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. Today," the super snapped. "**On time** is our creed. Now get flying."

Reluctantly Perkins pouched the pile of magazines. Their weight made the pouch strap cut into his neck.

"These things weigh a kilo apiece.. There must be a ton of them here."

"Tough winds," the super growled. "Now get up there."

Perkins turned to face the wind. It was only a breath of a breeze, but maybe it would help. He started running into the oncoming air.

"Get up and right now," he heard behind his back.

He pumped his wings vigorously as he ran, the heavy satchel bouncing on his stomach. Its bouncing threw him off balance, and he felt himself twisting and falling. He landed on his head and shoulders. Lightning flashed behind his eyeballs. With his eyes closed he waited for the world to quit reeling.

"Get up, you lazy bum," he heard in the distance. "If you don't get up this instant I'll throw you out."

There was something in that tone of voice that scraped a nerve, that hit him like a challenge. He clenched his fists, rolled over, and slowly stood up. Adjusting the strap around his neck he faced the breeze again. His eyes took in the sea of tree tops with its scattering of buildings pushing up through the green. He took strong strides into the wind and felt unexpected power surge through his legs and back and wings. He ignored the voice calling to him.

When he reached the edge of the building he spread his wings to their limit and dove over the edge. He glided downward a few meters, sideslipping toward the corner of the building. There he caught the updraft and let it carry him aloft until he was soaring over the city once more. No longer could he hear anyone calling behind him.

He was flying again, but somehow it was different this time. Better. He felt free. There was new strength in his wings. Down below he watched the green trees and the lush grass slide by. The clear sky beckoned as he soared toward the horizon.

Peter Perkins settled his aching legs onto the leather couch, his wings slipping easily through the slot in its back. He studied the doctor studying his card.

"Ah, Mr. Postal," the doctor said, looking up.

"Postal is my job title," he corrected. "I fly the mail."

"Ah, yes, here it is," the doctor said, adjusting his wings and looking at the card again. "Yes, Mr. Peter Perkins, Postal Flyer. Now Mr. Perkins, were you flying the mail when you—ah—stumbled over that child's flycycle on the walkway?"

"Not really. I was walking."

"You were walking? Not flying? Tell me about it."

"Well, my loop covers a busy neighborhood, airwise. There is a

sky-flitter stand in the middle of it, and those guys will just fly you down without looking. And there are high winds around some of the buildings, and twice I've got tangled up with a kite, and then there are the birds. So I was just walking along that strip when I stumbled over that child's toy. It was all sort of dreamlike."

"It was like in a dream?"

"Not *a* dream, but *the* dream."

"You dream you walk the mail?"

"Just about every night."

"Tell me about your dream."



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02V43

MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

by Julie Stevens

art: Robert Walters

The author is 32, a Legal Aid lawyer, and the mother (by single-parent adoption) of 13-year-old Michelle. This was the last of twelve stories she wrote during the 1980 Clarion SF Workshop and the first to be published.

Man's greatest achievements were conceived and realized not in the bracing atmosphere of plains, deserts, forests and mountains but in the crowded, noisy, and smelly cities
—Eric Hoffer.

Cheyenne read the sentence several times, wondering if the words chiseled into the granite cliff overlooking Thomas Creek Gorge were a specific quote or the ramblings of a passer-by named Eric Hoffer. Parts of the carved letters were defaced by a white, spray-painted scrawl that promised salvation if the author would repent.

Cheyenne sighed with frustration partly engendered by the sentiments of the second writer, and partly brought on by the unalterable fact that the Thomas Creek bridge was impassable to automobiles. After crossing back over the two remaining concrete standards, she turned her Mustang around, left a note on the steering wheel to tell the next traveler how to use the methane cannisters in the trunk, and put the keys in the glove compartment. Then, in the cursive script used only by city dwellers, she carefully scratched her name



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and destination under the hood. CHEYENNE WYO, DES MOINES CITY.

- She hefted the backpack onto her shoulders and started across the girders. At least there were walkable remnants. A hundred miles back, Silver Canyon bridge had been completely destroyed. It had taken two extra days to rappel down the canyon walls and climb the other side. Then, the only transportation on the eastern bank had been a small Italian Vespa which had proved to be unwieldy and uncomfortable. She had ditched the Vespa as soon as she discovered the '92 Mustang. Blessing her good fortune, she had tried not to think of why the Mustang was abandoned. The last entry on the hood read: TOM MENDELSON, HELL. In the back seat, she had found a box full of sketchbooks, each drawing dated and signed. They were not particularly good, the work of a talented but untrained hand. The Mustang had been left in the Rockies; and Tom Mendelson, whoever he was, had had a thousand opportunities for a suicide leap.

On the eastern side of Thomas Creek Gorge, Cheyenne found a choice of vehicles. She picked a Jeep. It was low on meth, and she lost time siphoning fuel from the nearby cars. Since it was so close to dusk she decided not to drive further. It took her a while to find a promising side road, but the one she selected led to a quiet stream running through a rockstrewn meadow. She spread out the sleeping bag in the back seat of the Jeep and was asleep within minutes.

Sometime during the night she heard the sound of motorcycles; and, remembering past encounters with other roving gangs, she drew her revolver and waited until the roars swept past her and grew faint in the distance. No longer sure how safe her campsite was, she dozed off and on for the rest of the night, afraid to risk sleep. At the first tenuous rays of dawn, she set out once again on Highway 80. There was a little traffic along the route, mostly farm families using the paved road as a short cut from one small community to the next. She was careful to slow down and wave at the robust, solemn-eyed children, and to ask their parents if they wanted a ride, grateful when none did.

Just outside of Sutherland, Nebraska, she was stopped by two village rangers. The men were polite but effective as they searched through the Jeep and the contents of her pack. They found the wrapped jams and jellies with the tags that read to *Gramma Jean from Ann*, and they accepted her pre-crafted explanation that she was to join her grandmother's commune in Illinois. She even evoked a sincere air of sadness when she fabricated a story of how her two brothers who had accompanied her had been killed in a stonefall two days back and how the revolver was the only part of their effects

she had been able to recover. There was no sense raising their suspicions by admitting that she was traveling alone.

"Honey, you hang on to that gun. You just might need it, what with the city-types on the road right now," the taller of the two rangers said, helping her to repack her belongings. His partner handed her a crumpled Sutherland methcard. "You stop at the pump in Sutherland and give this to Ed Crenshaw. He'll see you get the meth you need. Eighty's clear all the way to Grand Island but don't make any stops. And be sure you go 'round Des Moines City. There's evil brewin' in the city, and it's bound to spell trouble for us regular folk."

She nodded, thanked them for the methcard and the advice, and scarcely dared to breathe until the two men were back on their motorcycles, leaving trails of dust westward on the highway.

The encounter left her shaking. The rangers had been nice, not in the least terrifying; and once they decided she was respectable, they had been helpful. But she could not help wondering what would have happened if they had known she was Cheyenne Wyo. The last Cheyenne had been a middle-aged black man with one blind eye. He had spared her no detail as he told her how the citizens of a village much like Sutherland had put the eye out when they realized the stranger in their midst was a city mayor. The thought of her predecessor was depressing. It reminded her too well of how she was likely to wind up—old before her time, forever fighting the myth that the cities had caused the Great Conflagration and were responsible for the germ warfare that had followed. Blaming the victim was nothing new in psychology, but when it was applied to what remained of the American States—

Deliberately pushing such thoughts out of her mind, she pulled into the only meth station in Sutherland. She took out the ranger's card and flashed a smile at the old man who hobbled out to greet her.

"'Fraid I can't help you today, Miss," he said after taking the card. "Our stills don't make more'n we use for ourselves. We run out yesterday afternoon and Hank won't have a new load ready till morning." He looked her over, as if evaluating her worth. "You could ask, six houses down, if the Reeds'll put you up for the night. Bethie Reed's my daughter and a good cook."

Cheyenne silently cursed the Jeep's nearly empty meth tank. She could not refuse the invitation to stay in Sutherland. To do so would needlessly invite suspicion. She was already showing too much independence for a properly raised village woman.

"Thanks. I need a place to stay."

Later, installed in a second-floor bedroom, listening to Bethie Reed hum to herself in the kitchen below, Cheyenne was not sorry she had been coerced into staying.

"The stove's got the water hot. You best take your bath before dinner," a voice said from the doorway.

Cheyenne whirled around to find herself face to face with a frail, porcelain-complexioned girl whom she judged to be around fifteen. The girl entered the room uninvited and wandered about, picking up those possessions Cheyenne had left scattered on the bed. Cheyenne saw then what she had not noticed while the child stood still. The girl was crippled, the misalignment of her right hip painfully obvious as she used the furniture to propel herself from one place to another, dragging her twisted foot behind her.

"It's pretty," the girl said, fingering the fabric of the dress Cheyenne had laid out on the bed. "I always wear these." She indicated the printed cotton wrapper that tied at the waist but did not conceal her thin, blue-veined legs.

Before Cheyenne could respond, Bethie was in the room, half-carrying, half-dragging the girl out. "Don't let my Cora bother you none, Miss. She's been sick but she'll be fine any day now." Bethie's brown eyes begged her to accept that explanation.

"I hope you feel better soon, Cora," Cheyenne called as the mother took the girl down the hall. She heard the slam of a door at the far end of the corridor and the sound of a slap followed by the girl's stifled cry.

At dinner, no place had been set for Cora. Cheyenne was not surprised by that, only that the Reeds had managed to hide a deformed child for so long. Cheyenne City was full of people like Cora, driven out of their villages as children because if they could not work in the fields or the stores, they had no useful function. A fraction of these outcasts made their way to the nearest cities and disappeared into the streets. Some died, a few became criminals, and one or two rewarded the city with their art, their music, their creativity.

Eight people sat at the dining table. Bethie was at one end; and her husband, Cal, sat at the other. In between were their four sons, whose names came so fast that Cheyenne could not remember which name belonged to which freckled redhead. Then came Ed from the service station, and next to Ed, a dark-eyed, sandy-haired man who pulled out a chair for her when she entered the room.

"I'm Allen Curtis. I was passing through Sutherland on my way

to Minnesota and ran into the same lack-of-meth problem."

His smile was open and amiable. There was no reason for the tenseness she felt when she looked at him, but she could not deny to herself that it was there. Something about his tall, muscular body brought to mind the two rangers.

Cal, Ed, and Allen kept up an enthusiastic conversation that ebbed and flowed with scarcely any help from the others at the table. Cheyenne concentrated on her meal, Bethie's home-grown meats and vegetables a welcome change from the monotony of city synthetics. The voices swirled around her, requiring nothing more than an occasional nod or noncommittal answer when a question was directed to her. However, she glanced up at least twice to see Allen's gaze resting upon her. When she returned his stare, he shrugged and looked away.

At some point she noticed the tone of the conversation around the table had become more intense. Ed had her complete attention when his voice boomed out, "They're going to open up the cities, that's what. And come after our kids with sweet promises of soft living. We know that the cities got nothing to offer but sin and corruption, but our children don't. The freaks and do-nothings'll be using our women to make more of their kind. They'll take us over if we let them, and then it's back to war and plague. That's what they're doing in Des Moines City right now, organizing against us, plotting our destruction."

"I never heard the cities were closed to anyone," Allen interjected softly. "From what I gather, the meeting in Des Moines is simply to discuss a greater freedom of movement between the villages and the cities."

"Freedom to do what? Trade our good life for three rooms in a filthy city? Turn us into a bunch of freaks? Maybe we're too small to take on a whole city full of people, but we got to stop 'em any way we can. Sutherland's doing its part and you can bet towns like us all over the country are doing the same." Crenshaw's voice grew louder and shriller until Cal put his hand on his father-in-law's shoulder and commanded him to be silent.

"You keep yelling like that, Dad, and I won't let you go with us tonight. As for you, Mr. Curtis, I'd warn you to keep statements like that to yourself. You'll have people wondering if you are who you say you are."

"Anybody can check me out. I've got kin from Texas to Minnesota," Allen said, his easy manner taking the edge from the tension in the room. "Where I grew up, there weren't any cities, so I guess I just

don't take the threat as seriously as you do. Maybe if I lived this close, I'd worry more."

Bethie began to clear the table. "You don't have children, Mr. Curtis, or you wouldn't talk like that. They're the ones that go to the city. And they never come back."

One of the redhaired boys nodded vigorously. "Sometimes when kids are ugly enough or can't do a day's work, we send 'em to the city. We don't want 'em back." He grinned at his mother. Cheyenne saw the look that passed between mother and son, and was afraid for the lovely, deformed girl upstairs.

Bethie wiped her hands on her apron and feigned a smile. "Dad, you best be getting your good clothes on for tonight's meeting."

Ed Crenshaw pulled his arthritic body to a standing position and shuffled out of the room. Cheyenne watched him go, with conflicting emotions. It never failed to puzzle her how villagers all over the country revered their old, and willingly cared for aged relatives regardless of the disabilities, yet condemned their children to death without a second thought.

Later that evening, long after Bethie had knocked at her door to say the family was going to the town meeting, Cheyenne changed into her jeans and sat in the rocking chair planning the speech she would deliver to the Mayors' Conclave in Des Moines City. At thirty-three, she was still younger than most of the mayors; and if the meeting in Des Moines City was anything like the council sessions she had attended over the past six years in Cheyenne, she would be more radical, more inclined to rebellion, more insistent upon linking together the network of cities around the country, than any other mayor.

A high, lilting voice sang through Cheyenne's thoughts, and she suddenly realized the sound was coming from Cora's room. Cheyenne peered down the dimly lighted hallway, wishing she had thought to ask Bethie where Allen Curtis was. She paused in front of his door but could hear nothing. She decided against knocking and went instead to Cora's room. The door was partly open. Cora was seated on her bed with a stringed instrument on her lap. Her voice rose high and clear over the chords she picked from the instrument. Cheyenne knocked softly and pushed the door open.

Cora never looked up, but Allen Curtis was on his feet in an instant. Cheyenne did not know who was more surprised, she or the blond stranger. The fear that crossed his face for a brief moment startled her. They stared at each other and she had the feeling she was being appraised. Finally, Allen broke the awkward silence and

extended his hand to her.

"Albuquerque N-M."

Cora continued to sing as though there had been no interruption. A chill started in Cheyenne's stomach and spread its icy fingers upward. She refused the proffered hand, saying only, "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Curtis. I came because I heard the music."

He held her gaze a moment before smiling. "Whatever you say." He gestured toward the girl on the bed. "She's rather good for being untaught, isn't she?"

Cora's song came to an end, and she looked up expectantly at Cheyenne. "Mom says I sing pretty."

"Your mother is quite right," Cheyenne replied. She was going to say more when a distant noise caught her attention.

"The meeting will go by the window," Cora said serenely, as she plucked a few random notes. "Cal Junior says there's a burning tonight."

Allen and Cheyenne exchanged shocked looks. Cheyenne grabbed the girl's shoulders. "What kind of burning? Who do they have?"

Cora's eyes filled with tears and she tried to pull away. "You're hurting me. It's just somebody going to Des Moines City. A ranger brought him in yesterday and there was a meeting about it tonight. There's always a burning when they catch someone."

The sound of the crowd was drawing closer. When she looked out the window, Cheyenne could see the flickering torches. Her stomach tightened into a hard knot. Glancing at Allen, she saw the thin sheen of perspiration that covered his forehead.

"Provo Utah," he said, his tone bleak. "I was supposed to meet him yesterday outside of Sutherland but he never showed up."

She had heard of Provo, a giant bear of a man who was to chair the General Assembly. She swallowed her doubts and turned to Allen. "I've got a gun in my room."

He nodded. "Cora, you stay in here. Ann and I are going downstairs. I don't think you had better sing any more."

The girl smiled. "I'll turn off the lights too. Mom says I shouldn't let anyone see me."

Cheyenne and Allen stopped in the room to pick up the revolver. Cheyenne tucked it into the waistband of her pants, and they hurried down the stairs. A windbreak of trees lined the northern end of the Reed's property. Allen pulled Cheyenne against the rough bark, and together they watched the mob moving down the main street. Cheyenne had no doubt now that it was Provo the crowd was dragging

by a rope that bound his hands in front. The man's face was a mass of cuts and bruises, and he staggered uncertainly as several of the Sutherland men yanked on the rope. She could see two of the Reed boys running behind Provo, taking turns poking at him with a long stick. Cal carried a torch and stood several feet away with Ed, who was one of several people swinging fuel cans. Cheyenne looked for Bethie and finally spotted the woman trailing along behind. For a moment Bethie turned toward the windbreak, and Cheyenne shrank back, almost certain she had been seen. But Bethie continued to move with the crowd.

The horde passed by the Reed house, pushing toward the town square less than six blocks away. Allen and Cheyenne ran from yard to yard, hugging the sides of the buildings and keeping to the shadows.

Cheyenne pulled the revolver from her belt, but it was obvious to them both that the weapon had too short a range and was hardly enough to disperse a crowd this size. Allen had nothing but his knife. He grabbed her arm and pointed down a dark side street to two propane tanks along the side of the general store. Cheyenne caught his meaning immediately. The town square was not visible from the store. A fire here might provide a sufficient distraction. She waited until the crowd was just past the store; then, using the corner of the building for cover, she fired twice in quick succession. The force of the explosion sent shock waves through the building. Within seconds, the first blue and yellow flames began licking their way through the wood-frame store. Allen jerked Cheyenne's arm and directed her to the shelter of a nearby porch.

The townspeople were in disarray, surging toward the burning store, leaving their bound prisoner kneeling on the brick pavement of the town square with only four men standing guard.

"My God, no!" Cheyenne whispered desperately as she saw one of the men empty the contents of a fuel can over the helpless victim.

Allen gave a strangled cry and, before Cheyenne could stop him, ran into the square with his knife drawn. One of the guards saw him coming and grappled him to the ground. Their two figures tumbled over and over in the flickering torchlight until one lay still and the other, whom she saw to be Allen, staggered to his feet.

The men raced to their companion's aid but not before one threw his torch at Provo. The prisoner's clothing caught fire immediately. Provo pulled himself to his feet, his body ablaze, and lurched in Cheyenne's direction. Then he fell heavily to the ground and rolled about, trying to quash the flames.

Cheyenne ran into the square and fired her revolver at the man who had thrown the torch. Her first shot missed but not her second. Allen left the last two guards lying on the pavement, whether dead or unconscious she could not tell. He rushed past her and flung himself upon Provo, using his hands and body to beat off the remaining flames.

When the fire was completely out, Allen pulled himself away and gently touched Provo's face. The man's skin came off in Allen's fingers. He stared in horror. Provo's eyes were glazed with pain as he reached out toward Cheyenne.

"Please."

The word was clear and distinct though she could see the effort it took him to say it. She understood before Allen did that the man was reaching not for her but for her gun.

Slowly, carefully, without letting Allen's anguished "No! You can't!" stop her, Cheyenne squeezed the trigger.

Provo's body jerked back, then fell against Allen.

"We have to get out of here," Cheyenne said, trying to loosen Allen's grip on the body. She saw that his hands were badly charred.

"How could you kill him?" The words were flat, as though the emotion that lay behind them had to be restrained or it would engulf him.

"It was his right," Cheyenne answered.

Allen looked at her oddly for a moment before laying Provo's body on the brick pavement.

There was nothing she could say to comfort him. She put her arms around his waist and helped him out of the square, back to the safety of the shadows.

They made their way to the outskirts of Sutherland. It was slow going as the pain of his burned hands began to take hold. In the distance, Cheyenne could see the red glow of the burning building. There was a new frenzied pitch to the sounds as the mob apparently discovered its prisoner dead. She knew it would not be long before search parties were organized. She slid down the bank of the creek that bordered Sutherland to the south, pulling Allen after her.

They both staggered as he fell against her. His words came irregularly and in spasms. Now that she had time to look him over, she realized his neck and chest were burned as well.

"Leave me here. When the Reeds find me missing, they will know I tried to free Provo. There must be no connection between you and me."

Cheyenne was torn between the truth of what he was saying and

her unwillingness to leave him. He must have sensed her reluctance.

"I'll walk due east and try to stay near Highway 80. You can pick me up there tomorrow. If you don't find me within the first three miles, you will know I couldn't come."

They both knew he had little chance of making it to the highway alive, but she nodded anyway and agreed. She started to hand him the revolver, realized the futility of it, and tucked the weapon back into her belt.

She felt his eyes upon her as she scrambled up the bank and straight into the plump, quiet figure of Bethie Reed. Cheyenne gasped and reached for her revolver.

"You won't need a gun," Bethie said. Her voice was curiously level. "Is Mr. Curtis still alive?"

Cheyenne took a breath, then decided there was nothing to be gained by lying.

"He's burned but alive. He's down there." She pointed to the creek, knowing that Allen was there somewhere, listening to every word.

"I'll help you both, but there's a price."

"Yes?"

"You take care of Cora. You take her with you to the city." Bethie's hand clenched into a fist, then spread wide, then repeated both actions. "Dad and Cal can't understand how it is when a woman has a child, even a girl like Cora. They've put up with my fancies for a while now; but the time's coming when Cora will be put out of the village, if they don't burn her instead. You've seen her legs. She don't stand a prayer of getting to a city. I've got some money. . . ." Bethie's voice broke, and Cheyenne felt a sudden urge to put her arms around the older woman. But she stayed where she was and let Bethie recover her composure.

"Mrs. Reed, the cities are not at all what you think. Cora can learn there. She has musical talent; you must know that already. I won't let anybody hurt her."

After a long silence, Bethie nodded and started walking toward the creek bank. "You best be getting to bed. You got a long journey tomorrow."

The next morning, having eaten one of Bethie's mammoth breakfasts, endured Cal's account of the events of the previous night, and received a full tank of meth personally pumped by Ed Crenshaw, Cheyenne prepared to leave Sutherland. While Cal Junior wedged her backpack under the seat of the Jeep, she hugged Bethie very tight.

She pulled the vehicle out of the driveway and drove slowly through town. An elderly woman was scrubbing the blackened bricks of the town square. The woman smiled and waved.

It was not until she was two miles down Highway 80 and saw the pale-haired crippled girl clinging to the waist of a tall man with bandaged hands, that the mayor of Cheyenne City allowed herself the luxury of tears.

ANTS, ELEPHANTS... AND YEAH!

...fight each other, snap and vie
for little pieces of Fame's public pie...

But perhaps ants do that in the ant hill too,
snap and vie, and an elephant walking by
doesn't care, doesn't know, as he goes
strong and slow, sliding his hide, flopping his ears,
walking *thunk thunk*, following his trunk, nodding his eyes.
Oh, but he couldn't write that science! fiction! in a million years,
big thick gray sack on four pier posts pounding
along, with that huge dense head between fan ears hung;
but—I think the little ants! could! all fired
up with work-ethics, hustle, bustle, self-importance,
I'M RIGHT and move-that-load! And as anyone
picnicwise or otherwise must fondly know,
at any wide place in the road THEY (ants) LOVE
to hold conventions; oh, all over the place.
—I saw what must have been the other day
a GOH in my basket moving along the chicken:
he had a pie crumb clamped, and his feely smile exulted
was twice the pie flake's longest length and fully four times
ecstasy's grin-stretch normal, in his cloud-nine SEE-ME! face.

—David R. Bunch



IN THE WINGS

by George Alec Effinger

art: Bob Walters

The author has a book out from Putnam, *The Wolves of Memory*, and is working on another, *The Bird of Time*. This particular story, "In the Wings," is a candid look at what he has to put up with when he's trying to concentrate on his work. This, he promises, is the absolute last final appearance of Steve Weinraub (except for an earlier story to come out in *The Last Dangerous Visions*).

You might think people would have had an easier time remembering her name, considering that she was a daughter of Zeus and all. Well, Zeus had a lot of daughters, I suppose, but Phretys was the only one in our neighborhood. She was a Muse. You know, one of the Muses but not one of the big nine. Originally they had nine Muses—Thalia, Clio, that crowd. But that was back in ancient Greece, when nine ethereal beauties could just about cover every aspect of mankind's artistic endeavors. A lot of time has passed since then; and what with progress and civilization and the Renaissance and Marshall McLuhan and all, we've come to need more Muses. Today, at the twilight of the twentieth century, there are more than twenty-two hundred of them. Mnemosyne, their mother, was getting a little worn out around the time of the Pre-Raphaelites. Nobody much can keep them all straight now, so the first nine still have a big edge, prestige-wise and all, and the rest do the best they can. Phretys was the Muse of Modern Science Fiction Novels and Short Stories.

I remember her coming into the locker room and sitting down kind of heavily on a bench. "God," she said, "I hate this." She took out a cigarette and a lighter. "He takes forever, you know that?" She looked around the room. We were all sitting on benches, waiting. We hadn't even changed clothes yet. No one said anything; we'd all been through this before. There was nothing to say. Phretys lit the cigarette and took a long puff on it. "All right, we may as well get started. You all remember that novel he signed to do for Scribner's. He was supposed to have it done in April. He's really going to get working on it now. This time for sure."

"Good," said Sandor Courane.

"How much longer will we have to hang around here?" asked Eileen Brant.

"Who knows, with him?" said Phretys. She shrugged. "Is there anything to drink? Let me have a Tab."

"We got Coke and Vernor's," said Steve Weinraub. "All out of Tab."

"Somebody get me a small ginger ale, then. Now, the book is shaping up a little different than when he sold the idea a year ago."

Brant shook her head and stared off into space. Courane looked disgusted. "I knew it," he said. "I just knew it. I'm going to end up floating in deep space with no air and not the least hope of a sequel."

"What are you so worried about?" said Weinraub. "How many times have you ever ended up like that?"

"Take it easy, Stevie," said Brant. She rubbed her forehead tiredly.

"No, listen," said Weinraub. "From the way Courane talks, you'd think he always gets shot to pieces in the last chapter. But you take a look at it. Think back. Name me one time when anything really bad ever happened to him. *I'm* the one who always gets slapped down."

"Not anymore," said Bo Staefler. "You haven't worked in years."

"Thanks," said Weinraub bitterly. "Thanks a lot. I really needed that, too."

"Okay, all right," said Phretys. "All you people just settle down and wait." Phretys was tall and willowy and very patrician, with long, wavy blonde hair and pale gray eyes. She looked the way Botticelli might have painted her, if science fiction had appealed to him. She wore a long white stola with a Grecian border of purple; the robe had a Bloomingdale's label in it. She carried a black designer handbag in which she kept cigarettes, an address book, and carfare. She looked like she hadn't slept well the night before. "I have to go back and nudge him along so he gets this damn book finished, and I don't want to have to worry about a bunch of unhappy characters. I get enough aggravation."

"Well," said Weinraub, "some of us *are* unhappy."

"Okay," she said. "You all just change clothes and get ready to work. I'll be back later with an outline of Chapter One."

"Son of a bitch," murmured Brant, "do I hate Chapter Ones."

Phretys gave an unhappy laugh. "You think they're tough on *you*. I really miss the way it used to be before your time. Doc Smith. John Campbell. I'd just give them an idea and they'd be off. It hasn't been the same since Kornbluth and Kuttner died." Her voice trailed away; she left the locker room on the verge of tears.

"It's hard on her," said Justin Benarcek. "She doesn't have enough to do these days, the way some of these people write. They don't bother to wait for inspiration. An editor says, 'Write about a magic sword,' and that's it. No story and no characters, just a magic sword. They don't want to know any more. It makes her depressed."

Steve Weinraub looked in the mirror of his locker. His face still looked young. His hairline hadn't changed; there weren't wrinkles yet at the corner of his eyes. He hadn't lost a step going down to first base; it was just that he hadn't been sent down to first base in a long time. He slammed the door of his locker closed. "She gets depressed. *She* gets depressed? Goddamn Muse, huh? What does *that* give her? Thinks she's some special deal or something. A lot she has to worry about. Do you think she cares what kind of a life we have? Do you think she ever whispers *that* in his ear sometime?"

Brant went to the machine and punched the button for a can of Coke. She popped the top and took a swallow. "How hard is it for us, Stevie? How hard? It isn't so hard. *She* has it hard, Stevie. *He* has it hard. All *we* have to do is follow the directions."

"They both count on us to come up with new stuff all the time," said Benarcek. "You know I'm not very good at that. I'm great at following the story, but . . ."

Brant waved at him to be quiet. "Stevie, you've been working longer than anybody. The goddamn first story he ever sold had you in it."

"That's right," said Weinraub, "and do you know how long it's been—"

"It's been a long time," said Staefler, the dumb, athletic one. "He says he's gotten through all that material, that it's been all used up."

"All used up," muttered Weinraub. He gave a cynical laugh and sat down on the bench. "Where does that leave me?" He stared at the row of lockers.

The mad villain, Dr. Bertram Waters, leaned against a blackboard and exhaled smoke from an expensive French cigarette. He was tall and dark-haired, with eyes that were always described as magnetic, whatever that means. He was compelled to wear a carefully trimmed beard that made his fleshless face look satanic. Above his shoulder there were two announcements: *Please see P. if you haven't signed your Character's Agreement Form and SPACE SPY/TIME SPY anniversary picnic meets here Sat. at 10:30.* "You know what I think is sad?" said Dr. Waters. "What is so sad to me is that he's out there right now, right this very minute writing this, too, and we're tap-dancing through this goddamn story for him. That makes me sad as hell."

"Me too," said Brant bitterly. "I hate this kind of thing."

"Look," said Benarcek, "is this some kind of stupid 'What Is Reality?' story or something? Nobody does that any more. Phretys wouldn't try to palm that kind of thing off on him, would she?"

"Is it any worse than magic swords?" asked Staefler.

"Lots," said Benarcek.

"He wouldn't go for it, anyway," said Dr. Waters. "That's the whole point. He does what he does because he has judgment about these things. And we do what we do because—"

"Because he *makes* us do it," said Weinraub.

"Well, yes, but sometimes we assume a little control."

"He counts on that," said Benarcek, "like I said. But I—"

"This had better not degenerate into a reality story," said Robert Hanson. "I won't have any part of them. Or magic swords, either. Couldn't you just see it? A Cipher Book, in one of their awful pink covers: *Robert Wayne Hanson, Barbarian Swordsman*."

"Eileen Brant and the Magic Singing Sword of the Lost Empire," said Brant. "It makes the Book Club, naturally, wins a Hugo, ends up as a Marvel Comics series that lasts four issues."

We sat in silence for a minute or two, looking around the room. There really wasn't much to do at this point; all the action would come later. He was busy sketching in the setting, the way he usually began. Once these people from West Virginia wrote him a letter saying his books would be a lot better if someone died a horrible death in the first three pages. Who knows? Maybe they were right.

After a while Phretys came in again. "Chapter One is coming along fine. He has a pretty strong idea of where it's going, so you'll be working long and hard until this book is done."

"That's good," said Hanson.

Phretys looked up and raised her eyebrows, whereby we all knew that Hanson's services would very likely not be required.

"Oh," he said. He sat down and pretended to examine his shoes.

"So it looks like this: Courane, Staepler, Brant, Jennings, maybe Waters. A couple of new guys and one new girl."

"Goddamn it," said Weinraub, his voice an angry growl.

"Like I said, the book is off in a new direction. He's going to fit it into the Madison series in a kind of a nice way. It's a good idea, really, and I'm sort of proud of it. I practically had to bounce the postage scale off his head before he'd listen to me, but he finally got the message. None of you has ever worked in any of the Madison stories, am I right?"

"No," said Brant.

"I'm connected," said Courane. "Indirectly."

"You'll all like this story," said Phretys. She sat down and took out another cigarette. "There's this asteroid with a domed city on it." She lit the cigarette.

We waited.

"Is that all so far?" asked Brant.

Phretys looked apologetic. "Well, yes, so far."

"Aha," said Brant, "an asteroid and a dome. A real wealth of possibilities." She got up and walked away, toward the trainer's office.

"You're not familiar with the Madison series," said Phretys. "They're all charming and original and moving. In their own way."

"What she's getting at, dear," said the suave Dr. Waters, "what she's trying to find out is if Chapter One is going to be charming and original and moving."

"In its own way," said Benarcek.

"Sure," said Phretys. "Of course."

There was a tense silence.

"He doesn't have any story at all, does he?" asked Staefler.

"Of course he does. He has to. He had enough to sell to Scribner's in the first place. There's plenty of story, don't worry about that. He's just having a little trouble working into it. But this is just the first draft, remember, off the top of his head."

"Right," said Courane. He didn't sound particularly convinced.

"Why don't you give him another push?" asked Weinraub. "That's your department, anyway, isn't it? Inspiration?"

"Listen," said Phretys wearily, "there's a limit to how much of that I can do. He can only handle so much at one time. And besides, it isn't my job to write the whole goddamn thing for him." She smoked her cigarette for a moment, thinking. "If you're concerned about this, I suggest you try developing some ideas for unveiling around Chapter Three or Four. This book is short on women, so that would be a good place to begin. For Brant, I mean."

Eileen Brant came back into the locker room. "Do you know how many times I've had to save something of his? Whenever things start to get a little thin in the stretch, he throws something hot and fast at me and lets the readers watch me juggle for a few pages while he catches his breath. I've had enough of that, honey."

"That's all you are to him, Eileen," said Weinraub. "He doesn't really write about women, you know that. You're just a plot device."

She looked very hurt, but she nodded wordlessly.

"Who's the new girl?" asked Dr. Waters.

"I don't know yet," said Phretys. "Haven't named her or anything. I don't even know how she's going to fit in."

"A love interest, maybe?" asked Staefler.

The Muse hesitated, then nodded.

"Good Lord," cried Brant, "then what am I for?" No one cared to answer.

"Look, people," said Phretys, "I really do have to go now. I'll be back. Courane, you'd better be ready to get right to work when I get back. I don't know who all else."

"Give my regards to Broadway," said Brant cynically.

Phretys came back about ten minutes later. She looked like she had been in a cat-fight with one of the leopards at the Bronx Zoo.

Her hair was hanging down in damp ringlets on her forehead, her stola was soaked with perspiration, and she was nursing a fingernail that had been torn off below the cuticle. She dropped down on one of the hard wooden benches like a nose guard coming in after playing a tough half against Alabama. "Let me tell you," she gasped.

"Hard going?" asked Hanson.

"He writes fiction like he uses the Ohio State game-plan for an outline. You know, three yards and a cloud of dust. You buy every goddamn golden word with blood." We all made soft, sympathetic sounds and waited to hear the news.

"All right, Courane," she said, "you're on."

Sandy just sat in front of his locker for a few seconds with his eyes closed. He wasn't in a hurry to see what kind of a fix Chapter One was going to put him in.

"I'll go," said Weinraub. "Put me in if he doesn't want to go."

We all tried to ignore him. He was embarrassing himself.

"Come on, Sandy," said Phretys.

"All right," said Courane. He got up and followed her toward the tunnel.

"Look, kid," said Eileen Brant, "you're going out there a nobody, but you got to come back a star."

Courane turned and flipped her one. Brant laughed.

Now that things were starting to move along, we all felt a little better. All except the few of us who probably wouldn't be needed. But even those people still had to hang around, because you can never tell which way a story will go. Maybe Stevie would get into the book yet; that's all he wanted, because he was sure that once he got in, he could work the story around so the attention would be on him. He used to be very good that way.

We chatted and gossiped about people who weren't there and generally did all the things people do when they're bored out of their minds but can't go anywhere. Anyway, it wasn't fifteen minutes before Courane and Phretys came back. They had someone else with them.

"That was quick," said Dr. Waters. He was still leaning against the wall, and he had gone through three more expensive cigarettes. I guess he thought he looked good leaning against walls.

"You're not going to believe this one," said Courane. He took a towel and mopped his dripping face, then threw the towel disgustedly against the bank of lockers. "Chapter One starts off with a dream sequence that leads into a flashback about a half-remembered nightmarish hallucination. Is that great or what?"

"I don't want to have any part of it," said Brant.

"I didn't ask for this," said Benarcek. "I could be working for Cooperman or somebody like that."

"Now, listen," said Phretys, "I wasn't all that happy about it, either. But that's because I thought he was going to dribble off into the kind of thing he used to do ten years ago. But he's not, I promise. I want you people to act your age, now. This is Eunestra, one of my sisters. She's the Muse of Language And Scenes Dealing With Sex In A Frank Manner That May Offend Some Readers."

There was a general commotion. This was big news.

"Then . . . then this means . . ." said Staefler.

"He is trying something new," said Benarcek, with wonder in his voice.

"I've been waiting for this for years," said Brant with a contented look on her face. "Tell him I'm all ready for a frank scene. I'm warming up in the wings."

"Eunestra," said Weinraub. "Sounds like an organization kids collect for on Halloween."

"You realize this affects me personally," said Courane. "Everybody already assumes that I always represent him in the story. Now if he's going to start turning out smut—"

"Smut!" cried Eunestra.

"She's very sensitive about her job," said Phretys.

"I'm sorry," said Courane. "What I meant was that if all of a sudden he makes a change in his style, then the audience is going to think that I went along with it. That I approve."

Weinraub laughed. "Who really cares if you approve? What the hell difference does it make? Not to him, not to her, not to any of us, not to anybody. And whether you approve or not, you're going to be right there, right in Chapter One in one of his brand-new scenes, busily offending some readers right from the getgo."

Courane turned away, fed up with the whole thing. He went into the shower room.

"Now's our real chance, though," said Weinraub. "We can grab hold of the book now, while he's busy flitting around in flashbacks and fantasy sequences. It means he doesn't have a strong idea of where the novel is going, or, at least, not immediately. We can do it. We can make him write *our* story. Why not? We've done it before, in little scenes and sections. Why not try commandeering a whole book?"

Dr. Waters peeled himself away from the wall and stretched his shoulders and back. "My dear boy," he said, yawning, "let me point

out an important weakness in your plan. You are forgetting that at this moment, at this very moment, he is writing not Chapter One, but this particular short story. Chapter One doesn't really exist. That novel doesn't really exist. Only this short story has a real life. So when you speak of commandeering the novel, you are speaking the lines he has planned for you to say. You can't sneak up on him, you can't surprise him. He is manipulating you so cleverly, you think you are manipulating him."

Weinraub started to answer, but he closed his mouth. Waters was right, and there was nothing more to say about it.

"Did you see that?" cried Robert Hanson. "Did you see the way he gagged Weinraub? Stevie was all set to say something, and then—"

Justin Benarcek walked slowly toward Phretys, a horrified look on his face. "We're helpless in here," he said. "He's going to do it, isn't he? He's turning this into a reality story. And *you* gave him the idea."

"No," she said, "I swear I didn't. This story was completely uninspired."

Eileen Brant gave a sardonic laugh. "What else is new?" she asked.

"I know your problem, Stevie," said Phretys. "If it were up to you—which, thank God, it's not—this thing would be titled

STEVE WEINRAUB

in

In The Wings

by

Sandor Courane

featuring Eileen Brant *and* Dr. Bertram Waters

with Justin Benarcek Bo Staefler Robert W. Hanson

and Phretys *as* The Muse

"You don't really care about the rest of them. You don't really care about the ensemble's versatility."

Weinraub was livid. "You go to Hell!" he cried.

Phretys crushed out the cigarette on the floor. She smiled at him. "I've been there before, and I'll go again whenever he sends me. No problem. But you've got to get used to the idea, Stevie: you have to find a new act, or your career is over. Now, the rest of you, we have a lot of work to do. Eunestra and I will be guiding him through Chapter One, so keep your wits about you. I want Courane, Brant, Staefler, Jennings, and Waters. Right now. Come on."

The crew went with her through the tunnel. The few of us who stayed behind went back to what we'd been doing. I was reading Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. That was a job I would have liked to have been in on.

I had just found my place in the book when I heard a pitiful sob from Stevie. I looked up and saw him standing at the door to the tunnel. He was looking after Phretys and the cast. "Take me with you!" he shouted. There was no reply but the echo from the damp walls. I went back to my reading; he made me feel bad, and I didn't want to watch him fall apart in front of me.

I don't know how much later it was, but finally they all came back. Chapter One was finished, and so were they. I've never seen such an exhausted group of people. The only one smiling was Eunestra. Evidently they had had a successful first venture into the Frank Manner. I would hear all about it later from Eileen Brant. I couldn't wait.

Waters and Staefler and the others went to their lockers and started stripping. I read some more. Then there was a shout: "Look out, he has a gun!" To tell the truth, I've heard that line so many times on television and in the movies, I thought it was somebody quoting a bit from Chapter One. I glanced up to see Stevie holding a small nickel-plated automatic against Courane's head.

"Easy, Stevie," I said. These days he and I pal around lot.

"Just shut up, all of you," he said. His voice was like the snarl of an animal. "This is the guy who killed my career."

"Phretys!" pleaded Courane.

"Weinraub, put it down!" said our Muse.

"No," said Stevie. "Not unless I'm given some guarantees."

"This isn't the way to go about it," said Phretys.

"Weinraub," said Brant urgently, "don't you realize? He's manipulating you again! Right now!"

Weinraub thought that over briefly. "Well," he said, "I'll show him how it's done." He pushed Courane away from him and shot him four times, three times in the chest, once in the head. The shots rang in the locker room like a great bell at the end of the world.

Courane lay on the floor, motionless, running streams of blood across the tiles, in the kind of unnatural position that can't be mistaken for anything else. Brant was crying; we had never seen her cry before. I was stunned by the whole thing, and I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to. No one else was in better condition.

"There are three bullets left in the magazine," said Weinraub. "Does anyone have a cogent reason why I shouldn't put one of them

through my own head?"

"I'll tell you why," said Dr. Waters, who had never been Stevie's best friend. "I wouldn't give him the satisfaction, that's why."

Weinraub hesitated. It sounded like a good reason. He looked down at Courane on the floor and, I think, realized for the first time what he had done. Still holding the pistol, he folded up like a sprig of mimosa. Phretys stood pressed against the tiled wall of the locker room. The rest of us were still paralyzed. It became very quiet; the only sound was Eileen's weeping.

After a long pause, Courane raised his bloody head. "Is that it?" he asked. "Is the story over?"

"Shh, not yet," said Benarcek in a stage whisper. "Lie down and shut up."

Stevie just couldn't believe it. "The best scene I've had in ten years," he said, "and Courane ruins it. What an asshole." He shot Courane three more times, but of course it did no good.

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The next couple of months are the high season for cons. Make your plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number and I'll call back at my expense. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning, give your name and reason for calling right away. Find me behind the Filthy Pierre badge at cons.

AggieCon. For info, write: **TAMU, Box J-1, MSC, College Station TX 77844.** Or phone: (713) 845-1515 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: College Station TX (if city omitted, same as in address) on: 25-28 Mar, 1982. Guests will include: Roger (Amber) Zelazny, artist Vincent DiFate, Fred (Berserker) Saberhagen, G. R. R. Martin, Howard ("Ugly Chickens") Waldrop.

FoolCon, (913) 888-8500, x408/9. Overland Park KS. 2-4 Apr. Robert ("Psycho") Bloch, James P. ("Genesis Machine") Hogan, artists Alicia Austin & Tim Kirk. Balrog awards will be presented.

ChannelCon, 4 Fletcher Rd., Chiswick London W4 5AY, UK. Brighton, England, UK, 9-12 Apr. John Sladek, Angela Carter. EasterCon, the British national con. At the Metropole (site of SeaCon).

BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. 9-11 Apr. Artists Mike Whelan and Janny Wurtz. It's moving to a big hotel downtown. Attendance has been well over 2000, selling out the smaller place.

NasfaCon, 550 Finch Ave. W., Willowdale, Ont. M2N 1N6, Canada. Toronto, Ont. 17 Apr. Phyllis ("Sunburst") Gottlieb, Terence M. Green, Andrew Weiner, J. R. Colombo, J.F. Roy, Robert Priest.

ApriCon, B-C SF Soc., 317 Ferris Booth Hall, Columb. U., New York NY 10027. 17 Apr. Thomas Disch.

High Plains, 1206 W. 18th, Armadillo TX 79120. 16-18 Apr. The delayed renewal of this convention.

Contretemps, Box 12373, Omaha NE 68112. 23-25 Apr. Pat & Lee (Shree) Killough, Asprin, Donaldson.

MarCon, Box 2583, Columbus, OH 43216. (614) 497-9953. 30 Apr.-2 May. Hal ("Mission of Gravity") Clement, the Coulsons. One of the main Midwestern cons, carrying on the convivial traditions.

Colorado MountainCon, c/o Gardner, CMC, Leadville CO 80461. (303) 486-2018. 1-2 May. C. J. (Faded Sun) Cherryh, Ed Bryant, Real Musgrave, Reuben Fox, Michael & Lynne Goodwin. Masquerade.

Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220 (615) 832-8402. 7-9 May. "Midnite Maskeraid."

UniCon, 5425 N. Indiana, Kansas City MO 64119. 8-9 May. Not connected with other cons named Unicon.

LepreCon. Box 14500, Phoenix AZ 85063. (602) 278-1827. 14-16 May. Artists George Barr, W. Rotsler.

SkyCon, c/o Howard, Super Giant, 38 Wall, Asheville NC 28801. 15-16 May. Hal ("Needle") Clement.

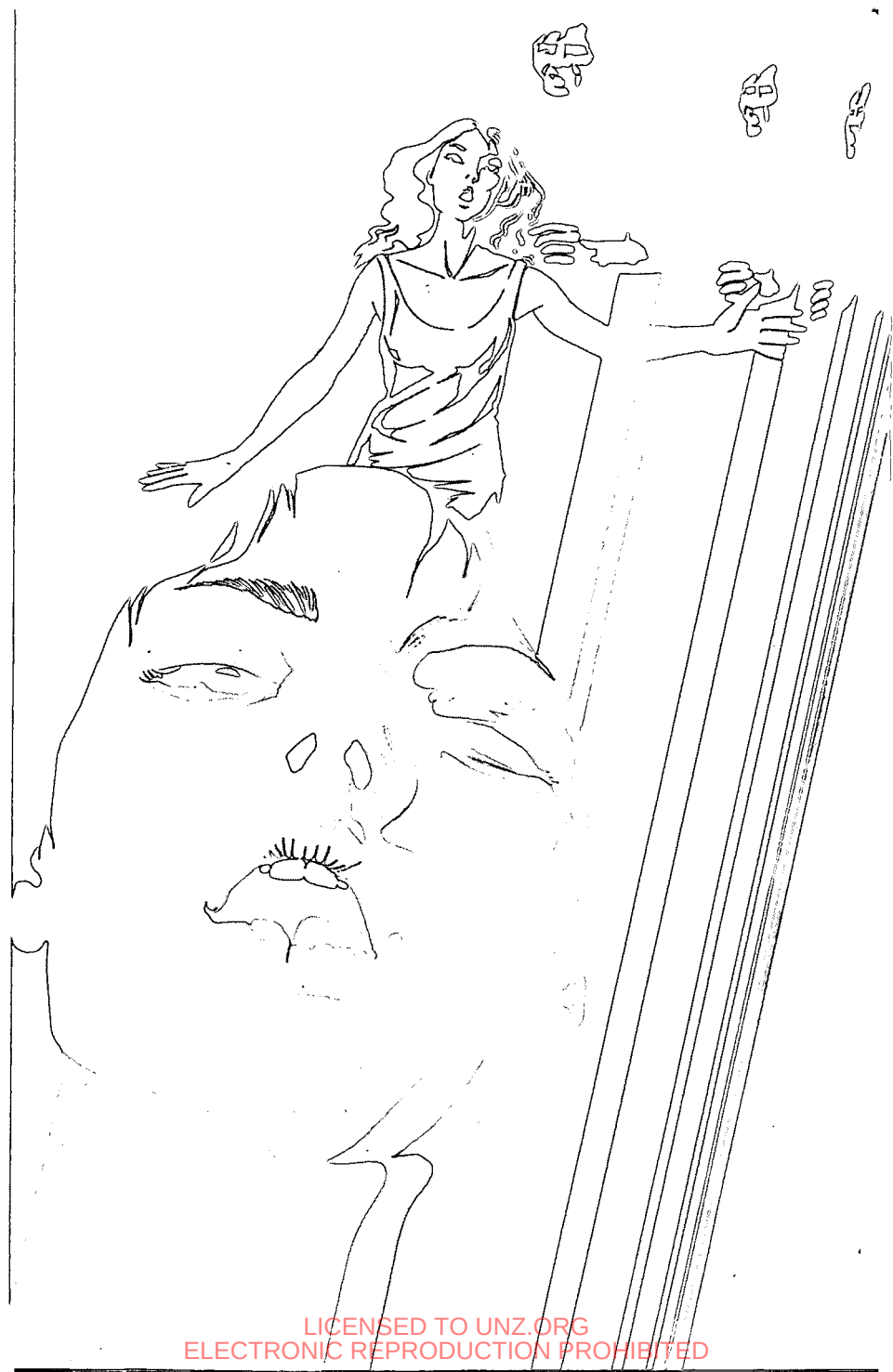
Texarkon, Box 6643, Texarkana TX 75501. 14-16 May. Gordon R. (Dorsai) Dickson. Artist Kelly & Polly Freas, Robert ("Mythconceptions") Asprin, Margaret Middleton. Masquerade and banquet.

VCon, Box 48701, Sta. Bentall, Vancouver, BC V7X 1A6, Canada. 21-23 May. Ben ("Colony") Bova.

WestCon, Box 11644, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 249-2616. Gordon R. ("Dorsai") Dickson, David ("Man Who Folded Himself") Gerrold, Fran Skene. The big Western regional con at the 1978 WorldCon site.

ChiCon IV, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690. 2-6 Sep., 1982. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 World SF Con. Go to smaller cons to prepare yourself for WorldCons.

ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203. 1-5 Sep, 1983. John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Join WorldCons early as possible to miss rate hikes.



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DARKSPACE

by Robert F. Young

Mr. Young is semi-retired, in the sense that he still writes. He is a native of Silver Creek, which is a small, dead town in western New York State. His house, he tells us, is just across the street from Lake Erie, so logically, fishing should be his principal hobby; but unfortunately he doesn't like to fish, so he spends the time he would normally be fishing in writing instead. He's published going-on 200 short stories, 95% of them SF or fantasy, and recently had a novel—*Starfinder*—published by Pocket Books. He is a veteran of World War II.

art: Jim Odbert

I live in a cave.

I have no name. Most of the time I am asleep.

I am always wearing the same clothes—a red-plaid shirt, tan trousers, black boots.

The rattling of stones on the steep hill that leads up to the cave's mouth has awakened me. This has happened many times before. I am lying on my back on the cave's floor. I roll over onto my stomach, get up on my hands and knees and creep to the cave's mouth. Oddly, for as many times as I have had the experience, I never know who my visitor is until I see her. She is a girl. No, she is not really a girl, she is a woman, but I think of her as a girl. We stare at each other in the gray light, and she is as surprised to see me as I am to see her. Then she screams and runs down the hill.

I run after her.

The hill is the steep slope of a small valley. Woods cover the valley floor. When the girl plunges into them, I plunge into them after her. She is still screaming.

The woods are maple mostly, but some of the trees are locusts, and there are occasional hickories. I did not know the names of the trees in the beginning, but one by one they have crept into my mind.

I run after the girl, but I do not catch her. I never do. At length we come to a narrow stream, and she splashes across it and disappears. I try to cross the stream too, but it is a barrier of some kind,

and I cannot get even one foot into it. At this point I feel weak, and I am barely able to make it back to the cave. I collapse onto the floor and fall back to sleep.

Basically, the experience never varies.

This time when the girl awakens me and we come face to face at the cave's mouth, I try to grab her. My hand brushes her shoulder before she draws back. She has an attractive face. Her eyes are light blue, her cheekbones high. Her cheeks are thin, and her mouth is bow-shaped. She has yellow hair whose ends curl inward along her cheeks and neck. She is wearing a thigh-length light-blue garment. She always wears such garments. Sometimes they are light-green instead of light-blue, sometimes light-yellow. Their material is so thin that I can see her body through them. But I am never interested in her body. I chase her but for one reason: to kill her.

After she draws back from my touch she screams and runs down the hill. Again I run after her. I am very close behind her, and I can smell her. The smell is of perfume and body sweat. But it does not make me want her. Want her how? I ask myself. I do not know. I know only that I want to kill her.

She enters the woods. Her hair streams behind her. I try to grab it, and my fingertips brush its ends. But I cannot get close enough to seize it. Through the woods. The woods are dead. There is no life in them, except for that of the girl and myself. Why should there be life? I ask myself. What kind of life do I mean? Words come. Birds. Insects. Small animals. There are none of these. Yes, the woods are dead.

No matter. I pump my legs harder. Ahead, I see the stream. I must catch her before she reaches it. I pump my legs even harder. But it is no good. She enters the stream, crosses it and is gone. I try to cross it too, even though I know I cannot. But as always I cannot even step into it.

I am weary now, and the woods are whirling. I stagger back through them to the hill and manage to climb to my cave. I crawl inside. I will myself not to fall back to sleep, and for a while I am successful. Then the walls crowd in on me and whirl the way the woods did, and the last of my awareness fades away.

Today, after I chase the girl and again fail to catch her, I manage to remain awake longer than I ever have before.

"Today" is a new word in my vocabulary, but it is not an apt one to apply to the time periods during which I am awake. I associate

"day" with a bright sky with a sun rising into it, and fields and trees and houses spread out below. But there is no sun in the sky above the valley, and the sky is always gray. Nor are there any houses or fields in my milieu. The little world I live in, wherever it may be, never changes from one of my awareness periods to the next.

But I cannot think of a better word than "day" to ascribe to my time periods.

As I sit here in the cave trying to remain awake, I realize suddenly that I know the girl I want to kill. But I cannot think of her name, nor can I think of why I want to kill her.

After I again chase the girl to the stream and she disappears beyond it, I stand by the flowing water and stare across it to the unobtainable other shore. Presently I see someone standing on the opposite bank staring at me. It is the figure of a slender man wearing a red-plaid shirt, tan trousers, and black boots. He has no hat, and his hair is the same off-brown color as mine. His face is familiar. I have seen it somewhere—many times. I keep staring at it, and as I stare the other man stares back, and at last I realize that the face is my face, with right and left reversed as in a mirror, and that the man is I.

Again, the girl. Again, the chase through the woods. I watch her as she disappears. She does so the instant her foot touches the opposite bank. Alice through the looking glass. I am beginning to remember quite well now.

I stare at myself across the stream.

It is clear to me now that my valley is only a half valley.

How far does it extend to my right and to my left? What lies behind the hill that houses my cave?

When I return to the hill I climb up it past my cave. I climb and climb and climb. At length I realize I am no longer climbing but descending. Suddenly I come to another cave. I stare at it. No, it is not another cave, it is my cave. I have barely time to crawl inside before sleep bludgeons me.

I think of my awareness periods as being diurnal occurrences. But are they? Perhaps between them I sleep for many days. I have no way of knowing. My awakenings are totally dependent on the whim of the girl: Only she is capable of bringing me back to life. I wonder why she keeps doing so. Surely she knows by now that I live in the cave. Why, then, does she keep climbing the hill to it? She seems

startled each time she sees me. Doesn't she remember my existence from one visit to the next? Apparently she does not, or she would stay away.

My awareness periods are much longer now, and they grow longer with each awakening. I am trying to get out of the valley. Today, instead of returning directly to the cave after the girl again escaped me, I turned right and set forth up the valley. I walked and walked. At length I began passing among trees I was certain I had seen before. I moved in closer to the valley's slope. Presently, through the branches of the trees, I made out the dark mouth of a cave. I hurried up the slope toward it. The shape of the mouth was familiar. I crawled inside. Yes, it was my cave. Sleep pounced upon me out of the shadows.

I am not going to try to get out of the valley by walking in the other direction. I know that if I do I will merely come back to where I set out from. An odd term has come into my mind. "Möbius strip." Yes, a curvature of space. That is what the valley is—a curvature of space. A tri-dimensional Möbius strip. A cruel cul-de-sac which it is impossible for me to escape from and to which only the girl has the key.

I have remembered food. People eat food in order to survive. I am a person. Why do I not need food?

Why do I not need water? One also needs water to survive.

Why am I never cold or hot?

I have remembered my name. It came to me while I was chasing the girl through the woods. Wishman. Charles Wishman.

The name brings other names to mind. John Ranch. Carl Jung. Immanuel Kant. Paul Cuiran. Janice Rowlin. Cheryl Wishman . . .

Is Cheryl the name of the girl?

She has my last name. Can she be . . . my wife?

I concentrate on the word "wife." It is a while before I can grasp—remember—its meaning. When I do I am bewildered. If Cheryl Wishman is my wife, why do I want to kill her?

Today, in my eagerness to catch the girl, I tackle her. I cling tightly to her legs as she falls, but somehow she manages to kick free. Her feet are bare, and one of them strikes me in the throat. But I do not even feel the blow.

After she gains her feet she glances at me over her shoulder. Her

face is masked with fear, but I can see beyond the mask to the familiar features, and now I know definitely that she was my wife. Was? Why do I say "was?" She must still be my wife. But if she is my wife, why do I want to kill her? At length the answer comes: *Because she killed you.*

But it is the wrong answer. I know now that she killed me, although I do not remember how or why; but that is not why I want to kill her. I want to kill her because she expects me to want to.

I am up on my feet now, and running after her through the woods. But as always she reaches the stream before I can catch her, crosses it and disappears.

I sit on the floor of my cave, thinking. My awareness periods are growing longer and longer.

Why did my wife kill me?

Why am I not dead?

A new word comes into my mind. Endo-analyst.

It is a key word, and it unlocks much of what I am trying to remember.

I was an endo-analyst. I studied Cuiranism at the John Ranch School of Endo-psychology. I opened a practice on Beech Street in the subcity of Forestview, N.A. I bought a hillhouse on the outskirts and settled down there with my wife, Cheryl. We had many friends. We threw parties and went to parties our friends threw. My practice thrived. During deer season Cheryl and I often went hunting.

But I cannot grasp/remember what Cuiranism means.

Today the girl—no, I will call her Cheryl, for Cheryl is who she is—today Cheryl falls while running down the hill. But she twists aside when I try to leap upon her, and I can find no purchase, and roll halfway down the slope. She beats me to the valley floor, and as I plunge into the woods after her I hear myself screaming the word "murderess" over and over. It is as though she put the word into my mouth.

I have it! Cuiranism is Paul Cuiran's theory of the nature of dreams.

Of the nature of reality.

But it is more than just a theory. Long ago, he turned it into fact. But Freudian analysts have refused to accept it as such. They keep trying to laugh Cuiran away.

They have been unable to do so.

Near the *fin de siècle* Cuiran combined properties of Kant's transcendental aesthetic and Jung's collective unconscious and came up with Lightspace and Darkspace. Lightspace, he asserted, is reality as we perceive it, Darkspace the land of dreams. Both, he said, constitute the Kantian thing-in-itself, and neither possesses time nor, despite the names he applied to them, space. Time and space, he maintained, are imposed by the beholder.

He focused his endeavors on the investigation of Darkspace. After developing a drug, which he called cuiranum and which established an emotional rapport between himself and his patients, he found he could enter their dreams. He concentrated on their recurrent dreams, and began curing them by destroying or changing the dreams. He called himself an endo-analyst. In the Catskills, John Ranch, his foremost disciple, built the John Ranch School of Endopsychology.

I have entered thousands of dreams.

Recurrent dreams.

A competent endo-analyst does not bother with ordinary dreams. Even so-called nightmares are harmless. It is the obsessive dream we set our sights upon.

Patients with recurrent dreams came to me, and I entered those dreams and cured them. I know what Darkspace is. It is many things if you explore its Jungian archetypal ramifications, but to the practicing endo-analyst it is nothing more than what the dreamer makes it, and its clock is the dreamer's mind. Invariably the two "levels" of reality, of the thing-in-itself, are divided by a symbolic barrier. When the dreamer awakes, he/she passes through that barrier. The dreamed-of never can.

I am in Darkspace now. But not as an endo-analyst. I am the dreamed-of.

Cheryl's dreaming mind has fashioned out of Darkspace a woods that reverts back into itself, and a topless ridge. She uses a woodland stream for her barrier.

She killed me, and now she keeps dreaming that I am hiding in a cave, waiting to kill her. But her sleeping mind keeps forgetting I am here, and, unaware of my presence, her dream-self keeps climbing the slope to my cave.

Why did she kill me?

How?

I cannot remember. The walls of the cave creep closer to me as I try to think. The cave's mouth darkens. Just before the last of my

awareness drifts away, a jagged bolt of terror tears through my mind. If she does not dream the dream again I shall be truly dead!

We went hunting that day. Yes, I remember now.

Cheryl, a short time ago, disappeared beyond the stream/barrier. I am sitting on the floor of my cave.

Yes, we went hunting that day.

She and I.

The day is obscure. My thoughts take me back beyond it. I become again what I was before my murder. A practicing endo-analyst. I sit in my Beech Street office, listening to my patients recount their dreams. I am becoming richer with each passing moment. It is said in professional circles that my fees are exorbitant. Perhaps they are. But if a doctor does not rob his patients he will not be held high in their esteem. In any event, I am justified in charging what I do. I spent five long years acquiring my expertise. Even with cuiranium you do not walk blithely into dreams. And each dream is different, and you must learn from the patient before you enter it what you will encounter, and you must know beforehand exactly what you must do to destroy the dream or to alter it in such a way that he or she will not dream it again and will be cured of the malaise that occasioned it.

Such dreams I entered!

A woman is walking down a street. She sees a parade of children approaching and pauses to watch it go by. She sees that each child carries a spear. When the center of the parade is abreast of her, the Leader cries, "Halt!" and the marchers stop. "Left face!" cries the Leader, and the children turn simultaneously in the woman's direction. Half of them are girls, half boys. The girls are dressed in pink uniforms, the boys in blue. Each has a large golden cross hanging from a golden chain around his or her neck. There is no sunlight, but the crosses glitter as though the sun were high and bright. "Phalanx!" cries the Leader, and the second, fourth, and six lines take one-half-step to the right. "Close lines, lower spears and advance!"

The phalanx now approaches the woman, its spearheads glittering in the nonexistent sunlight. Terrified, she tries to back away from the solid line of spears, but comes immediately into contact with the façade of a building. Then she tries to run up the street, but the phalanx curves inward, blocking her. I am standing in a nearby doorway. I knew what the children are before I entered the dream. They are those she would have given birth to if she had not defied

the Church and taken birth-control pills. I know she will awake before they reach her, but I must stop her from dreaming of them again. I remove my belt, walk over to her, kneel on one knee and pull her down across the other. I raise her dress, pull down her panties and begin beating her with my belt across her bare buttocks. She screams in pain. The phalanx halts, and the children lower their spears and begin laughing. A moment later the dream ends. It will never recur.

A young man is climbing a cliff. He is not a mountain climber and he is terrified. He has reached a part of the cliff above which he cannot find a handhold. His present position is precarious, and shortly he will fall. He will then awake. I have deduced from his description of the recurrent dream that the cliff is the university at which he is taking a pre-med course, and I have concluded that he does not have the right qualifications to become a doctor. He cannot climb higher because he does not want to climb higher, and it is this that he must admit to himself.

I have positioned myself a considerable distance above him, and now I drop him a rope. "You must swing 'way to the right," I shout down. "There is a ledge there." Desperately he seizes the rope, kicks out and makes a pendulum pitch to the ledge. It is a good-sized ledge, and there is a wide fissure leading up from it to the top of the cliff. So now, instead of awakening, he climbs up the fissure. It is such an easy climb that he realizes it is the logical way for him to climb the cliff and that he should abandon the previous route altogether, even though the new route will take him to a different eminence. When he reaches the eminence, he is enchanted by the view and freed from his impasse.

Such dreams!

I used to enter many of my wife's dreams.

I have chased her again, and have returned to my cave. It seems that this time when I awoke I had slept for ages.

I entered her dreams out of curiosity at first. I merely wanted to know what she dreamed of. I would take a cuiranium before going to bed, and then, lying beside her in the darkness, I would slip my dream-self into her mind.

Her dreams were simple affairs, and they bored me. But I was already bored. With her. And it irked me to find that she was as innocent as she seemed.

Her simplicity had always been an affront to my intelligence. She embarrassed me at parties, saying the wrong thing, laughing the

wrong time at a joke, or not laughing when she should. And then there was this thing I had going with Janice Rowlin. All of my patients were rich—they had to be to afford me—but Janice was filthy rich. Her parents had built a castle on the Hudson. Like many of my female patients, she had fallen in love with me. She was an only child, and would someday inherit her parents' fortune. But money did not comprise her sole fascination. She was sophisticated, cultured, intelligent—everything Cheryl was not. I wanted to marry her, but Cheryl was old-fashioned, and I knew I would have to fight for a divorce and feared that the publicity would hurt my practice.

There are two diametrically different ways an endo-analyst can set about killing someone. He can do so from without—or from within.

Cheryl often dreamt of water. She would dream she was standing on a seashore and she would see a huge wave approaching the beach. A tsunami. She would turn and begin to run. I began tripping her, adding to the agony of the experience. She would go sprawling, roll over and see the great wave almost upon her, and scream. She would see me, too, but I always assumed she merely believed she dreamed me. She would scramble to her feet and begin running again, still screaming. She would always awaken, of course, before the wave reached her. Then she would lie huddled in bed beside me, whimpering for a long while before she fell back to sleep.

Another dream she dreamed over and over was what I thought of as a childhood dream. It cannot be referred to as a recurrent dream in the usual sense of the term, because it did her no psychological harm. Actually, before I began entering it, it helped her.

The dream was about her teddy bear. She would be a little girl and she would walk into a nursery wallpapered with pictures of toys and sandboxes and swings and teeter-totters, and look for her teddy bear. When she failed to find it she would become frightened. She would search for it everywhere. Under the the bed, behind the bureau, in the closet, behind the window curtains. Then at last she would find it under the pillow of her little bed, and she would pick it up and hug it and then lie down on the bed holding it to her, and when she fell asleep she would go right on sleeping in her real bed beside me. In the morning she would awake bright and happy, and hum one of her favorite songs while she dressed.

The first few times I entered the dream I stayed out of her center of observation and she did not know I was there. Then one night I followed her into the little room, and after she found the bear I tore it out of her arms and plucked its eyes out. Then I handed it back,

and she lay down on the bed with it, sobbing. When the dream ended I could hear her crying beside me in the darkness.

I plucked the little bear's eyes out in several successive dreams, then I changed my tactics. Now, when I took the bear from her, I held it by the hind legs and began swinging it so its head kept banging against the wall. Each time I did this, Cheryl would wake up, screaming. I did it again and again and again. In all of the teddy-bear dreams I transformed myself into an old man with a crooked nose and mean little eyes, and I was certain she thought the old man was merely an added dream-element. But I had betrayed myself in the water dreams by entering them as myself. Mornings after the teddy-bear dreams she would wake up with a haggard face and swollen eyes. She would have nothing for breakfast except coffee. I do not believe she ate all day. She grew thinner and thinner. She caved deeper and deeper into herself. I was certain she would kill herself. But she did not. She killed me.

It seems I have slept for an eternity before she dreams the cave dream again. But there is no way for me to know. She climbs the bank to the cave and we look at each other, and then she runs screaming down the slope and into the woods. And even though I am aware by now that I will never catch her before she reaches the stream and disappears, I still pursue her. She has incorporated the instinct to do so in my-dream-self, and I am helpless against it.

If a long time truly passed between this dream and its predecessor, perhaps she is undergoing a cure. But I do not think so—not only because I have seen no sign of an endo-analyst but because I do not believe she would seek help, since this would necessitate her having to tell the analyst—ecto or endo—that she killed me. But recurrent dreams sometimes fade out of their own accord if the malaise that causes them loosens its hold. If such is the case with this dream, I shall soon be dead.

I am already dead, of course, but only in proper time. In the timelessness of the thing-in-itself I am both alive and dead. Cuiran theorized that the dreamed-of in recurrent dreams, if dreamed of often enough, could acquire awareness independent of that of the dreamer's, whether the dreamed-of were alive or dead in proper time. I have borne his theory out.

How did Cheryl kill me?

I find that I cannot think clearly any longer. I have again remained awake for a long time, but I cannot even begin to remain awake for the entire periods that separate her dreams. I am about to fall asleep

again. I try to fight back the dimness that crowds in around me. It is no use. My awareness fades away.

We went hunting that day. Yes. Cheryl and I. Hunting deer. We used old-fashioned 16-gauge shotguns with slugs. Rifles are still taboo in hunting deer. It was in November. Late November. I am remembering very well as I sit here in my cave after returning from my futile chase. It was in late November, and there had been a light snow. An ideal snow for deer hunting.

We followed deer tracks through the woods. We came to a clearing. We knew the deer was close, and we paused at the clearing's edge. Then, to our right, we saw the deer step out of the woods. It was a big buck, upwind from us. Both of us raised our guns. I dropped the buck with a shot to the throat, but I could see it was still alive. Cheryl did not fire. My second slug entered the side of the buck's head, killing it instantly. I could see the evanescent clouds of Cheryl's breath. I could see the evanescent clouds of my own. She still had her gun fitted against her shoulder. "Aren't you going to make sure he's dead?" she asked. "I know he's dead," I said, but I walked toward the animal anyway. Her first shot struck my left shoulder, twisting me around. As I sagged to the ground I could see her face. The bleakness of her eyes shocked me. "No," I said. Her body jerked slightly, and there was a great whiteness. I remember nothing after that.

Thank God she dreamed me again!

It has been a long time since my last awareness period. A very long time. I can sense the passage of proper days and proper weeks. I must get out of the dream. Must!

Is it possible for the dreamed-of to dream? Can I, by dreaming of my real self, *become* my real self?

I have not dreamed yet, but perhaps I can.

There is no other way out of this cul-de-sac.

If I can dream of myself as I was in real life and become my real self, I will be able to avert my Lightspace death. With my precognition I will know when the time comes *not* to turn my back on my wife and walk into the clearing.

Perhaps the best moment to dream of will be the moment before I shot the buck. I will shoot it and then shoot it again, and then *not* go into the clearing. And Cheryl will be standing there beside me with her gun raised and I will look at her and say, "You go see if it's dead." And when she does, I will shoot her.

A hunting accident. If it worked for her, there is no reason it should not work for me.

I concentrate on the moment as sleep closes in. I picture the clearing in my mind. I picture the buck about to walk into it. I see Cheryl standing beside me. Two people. A clearing. A buck.

I saw trees!

Yes, trees!

I did not see Cheryl, nor did I see the clearing. But it is a beginning.

I know this time that it has been ages since she dreamed me last. I can feel a stiffness in my mind. But I dreamed of trees again. And the leaves of a forest floor. Oh, I am close, so close! I concentrate with all my might on the moment as sleep closes in again. Cheryl and myself standing at the edge of the clearing. The buck about to step into it from the woods. This time I *must* escape!

The forest floor is covered with this year's leaves. Beneath them lie layer upon layer of leaves from years before. I sink deeply into the layers of leaves as I walk. There are trees on either hand. I glance to my left, but see no sign of Cheryl. All I see are trees.

There is a clearing just ahead. This is wrong. I should be standing at the edge of it with my wife. I look to left and right. Oddly, I do not need to turn my head to do so. I still see no sign of her. I sniff the air, then step into the clearing. Then I see my wife. And myself. I am pointing a gun in my direction. *No!* I try to scream, but I cannot say the word. I start to run. Then the gun blasts and there is a horrid tearing in my throat. I crumple to the ground. The gun in my hands is still pointing in my direction. *No!* I try to scream again, but I have no voice. In the final second of my life I know that I have not only escaped Darkspace, but Light as well.



THROUGH TIME & SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT XIV



by
Grendel Briarton

art: Tim Kirk

In 1597, the Sultan Mahommed III, impressed by British victories over the power of Spain, sent Queen Elizabeth a magnificent python as a token of his esteem. Never had such a huge and beautifully marked serpent been seen in England, and at first the Queen was much taken by it. Francis Bacon and Ferdinand Feghoot designed a vast iron snake-house for it, and she proudly displayed it to her favorites and to foreign ambassadors.

Almost from the beginning, however, she was tormented by ominous dreams, all of which seemed to originate with the snake. Finally, she summoned the bold Earl of Essex. "Have the headsman destroy it!" she ordered.

"Headsman?" cried the Earl. "Your Majesty, I fear no mere serpent. To serve you, I shall slay it myself!"

Feghoot went with him. Servants were summoned, carrying spades for its burial, and the intrepid Earl entered the cage, where the python was sleepily digesting a fat Southdown ewe. With one blow of his broadsword, he struck off its head.

"Ferdinand Feghoot," he exulted, as it writhed in its death agonies, "now our Virgin Queen once more will dream only sweet dreams! She'll see me as a second St. George, and my place in her heart will be always secure!"

"Be not so sure, my lord," said Ferdinand Feghoot, who of course knew of the sad fate awaiting the Earl. "Who knows what dreams may come when we have shovelled off this mottled coil?"

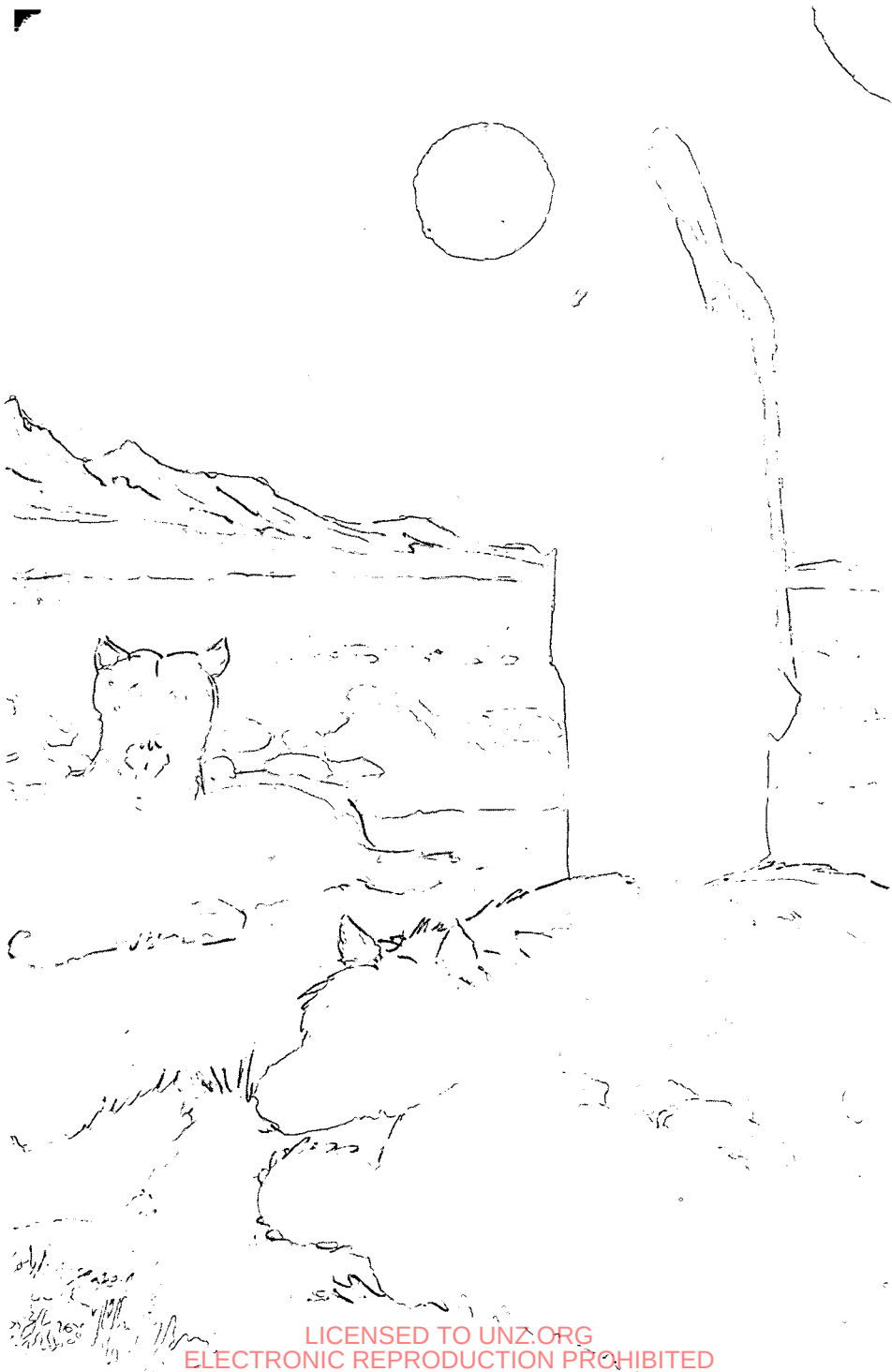
THE TEACHING

by Sydney J. Van Scyoc

art: Frank Borth



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The writer has recently acquired a word processor, and by this printing may have figured out how to use it. She recently decorated her office in a pre-Columbian manner to help negate the smell of hot computer circuits. Berkley Books is publishing her novel, *Darkchild*, which is set on the Brakrath of "The Teaching," but many centuries later.

It was early morning when Lara left the valley, slipping from the stonehall long before the kitchen monitors fired the ovens for the breakfast loaves. In her pack she carried three leather halters, four lead ropes, and a coarse-woven brown cloak left behind by the guardian who had accompanied the redmane plow teams to the valley the spring before. In her pouch she carried a waterskin and bread enough for the first three days of her journey.

Nothing more. Berrel, master of her guild, did not know she was going. Minossa, juris of the hall, did not know. She had not told her friends and she had not told her family.

That hurt, that her mother would worry about her so soon after her father's death. But there was no other way. Had she told anyone where she was bound, she would not have slipped away so easily. However strong her reasons for going, they would not have stood the test of argument.

Still she went, remembering her father's drawn face, remembering other faces, remembering the ease with which the redmane plow teams broke the soil for spring planting and the harshness of all the labor that followed. This was a hard world, a cruel world—a place where summer fell briefly on stony soil and the struggle to survive was unremitting. Yet each spring the guardians led the redmanes back to the plain after their brief stint at the plows and the people of the valley broke themselves trying to win subsistence from the soil.

They'll be glad when I come back. They'll be glad I've stolen redmanes to pull sledges and carry loads year round. And in a few years they'll see that the redmanes can be bred to live in the valleys as well as our sheep and fowl—that the guild can turn even a Brakrathi breed to docile stock.

But she knew none of them would be glad: her family, the people of the valley. They would be frightened because she had broken the tradition of centuries, anxious because she had brought animals

among them they did not know how to care for, apprehensive because she had shattered the unspoken law that no person from the valleys trespassed upon the plain.

Lara shuddered, haunted by images of guardians in their cloaks, tall, silent, dark—so utterly different from the valley people with their stocky bodies and fair skin. The two had been related once, long ago. They had common ancestors in the people stranded on Brakrath when their starship failed. It was hard now to believe they came from common stock. The distance between them—in walking spans, in centuries, in customs and ways—was the distance between race and race.

Lara paused in her climb. She had crossed the sloping valley floor and reached a prominence that commanded a view of halls, fields and orchards. Time had made two races of the people stranded on Brakrath. Just so, time could make two breeds of the redmanes, one a breed of Brakrathi herd animals living as they always had in the plain, the other domestic animals ready to lend their strength to the struggle for survival.

Arguments—good arguments. She turned them over in her mind as she continued to climb, her feet carrying her farther and farther from the valley. Eventually she turned and found that the halls of the valley, the fields, the orchards had vanished below. She was alone.

Utterly alone she walked for the rest of the day. She slept the night in a crevice in the rocks, wrapped in the brown cloak, praying no predator would find her. The next day she continued her journey and the next after that. She learned to forage for berries and other edibles, learned to smell water as it burst from the ground in springs, learned to put foot before foot without thinking more than she had to.

Occasionally as she walked she saw small mountain animals scampering after early-ripening seeds. Sometimes she stopped to watch, sitting very still, not even shivering in the brisk mountain breeze. She needed their company, for after the second day the lofty silence of the mountains haunted her. She stood alone overlooking settled valleys and strained to hear human voices from the fields below. Sometimes, high in the mountains, she stopped and listened intently, hoping to catch the grumbling roar of a rockslide or the harsh cry of a soaring bird. Incredible that the guardians brought their plow teams through this solitude each spring to do only a few days' work in the valleys.

Perhaps that was why she always saw distance in their eyes.

Perhaps that was why they would not speak with valley people. They hardened themselves for the solitude of the journey back by keeping silence.

At last, on the sixth day, she stood on a rocky outcropping overlooking a vast, stretching greenness. Shielding her eyes against a suddenly bright sun, she saw below more level land than she had ever seen before, more than she had ever dreamed: the plain. It was broken only by an occasional solitary tree. And in the distance—she caught her breath—in the distance was an ill-defined darkness that touched the horizon.

The herds. The animals she had come for were here—a few among the many. Lara fought down a moment's apprehension. She had come to take redmanes, yet she knew nothing of them. Stocky, heavy-set animals with strong hindquarters and short, muscular necks, they worked docilely enough for the guardians. But no valley person had ever been permitted to place harness upon them. Even field monitors were required to keep fifty paces from the animals as they pulled the plows. And the guardians stood jealous guard over their pens by night, letting no one near.

Now she would go near, near enough to feel their breath on her hand. Quickly Lara pulled the cloak from her pack. The fabric was thick-woven and musty, the color of earth. If she tucked her ashen hair under the hood and pulled the coarse fabric well over her face, if she walked as a guardian walked, deliberately, with long strides, surely she could pass as a guardian—at night, at a distance. She would go nowhere near the guardians who stood vigil.

But she must go near the redmanes. And if they saw she was not a guardian, if they shrilled in alarm—

This was no time for misgivings. Lara pulled on the heavy cloak and sat to wait for night.

At dusk she stood and pulled the hood forward to hide her fair skin and grey eyes. She drew a deep breath and set down the trail.

When she reached the grasslands, Lara walked briskly, outdistancing any lingering qualm. Tall grasses brushed her ankles and dew soaked the hem of her cloak. She walked until she heard the first night-sounds of the redmanes: a shuffling of padded feet, the occasional shrill of a restless yearling, the sleepy grunt of its elders. Then she stopped, her fingers closing tight on the rough fabric of her cloak.

The moons stood high in the sky. Scattered shapes huddled in the grass. Others dozed on their feet. She raised her head and caught the redmanes' scent, damp and heavy. Mingled with it was the smell

of soil and trampled grass.

There was no sign of the guardians. Lara scanned the sleeping herd for sight of them before slipping forward again.

Soon she moved among the scattered animals, so close she could touch them—closer than any valley person had come to a redmane for as many years as were written. They were strongly-built, their grey fur dense and dull, their auburn manes hanging ragged to their knees. The occasional animal that woke and gazed at her did so incuriously, without giving alarm.

Lara skirted the fringes of the herd, after a while summoning the courage to begin studying individual animals. For use with a cart, she mused, she wanted animals with maximum strength in shoulders and hindquarters. But equally important was a tractable temperament, and how could she evaluate that when the animals slept? She glanced around anxiously, still alert for guardians.

There were only redmanes, sleeping with quiet breath. Lara studied them for more than an hour before she chose her first pair. Buck and mare lay together in the grass. The buck didn't stir when Lara paused before him, but the mare raised her head and gazed at Lara from sleepy eyes. Lara knelt and touched the mare's brow and the animal sighed heavily in response.

Lara hesitated, then took a harness from her pack and dropped it over the mare's neck.

Before she could tighten the straps, a shadow fell across her shoulder. Lara jumped up, her heart leaping.

A guardian stood silhouetted against the sky—stood like a stone pillar, her face shadowed. Lara could see only the gleam of her eyes and the enveloping folds of her cape.

"Wh—?" Lara expelled the word half-uttered. Where had she come from? What had wakened her? The redmanes hadn't given alarm. Lara's hands tightened on emptiness. She had no hope of deception. The guardian could not mistake her for anything but what she was—a valley woman come to steal redmanes.

But the guardian did not move, did not speak.

Lara stood dumbstruck for moments longer, while her first panic subsided into something harder. She had her harness at the mare's neck. If the guardian did not want her to take the animal, let her say so.

Quickly, before audacity could desert her, Lara crouched and secured the harness. The mare sighed again, her nostrils quivering. "Hu!" Lara said, jumping up and snapping at the harness. At least she knew the commands the guardians used to work their teams.

She had watched often enough from a distance while the teams pulled the plows.

The mare blinked sleepily, then took her feet. The buck woke, shook himself and stood. Both animals studied Lara from half-lidded eyes. "Ho-eee!" Lara commanded and stepped forward, tugging the mare's rope.

The voice that came from her right was husky, almost hoarse. "Do you intend to take these two knowing nothing about them?"

Lara wheeled to face a second guardian. Deliberately the guardian pushed the hood back from her face. She stood head and shoulders taller than Lara, with broad, lean shoulders and a face so creased and weathered Lara couldn't guess her age. The dark hair that fell to her shoulders was coarsely streaked with white.

Lara could not move. She could only stare. The second guardian's eyes were obliquely set above flaring cheekbones. Her brows were dark and heavy, her nose straight and long, her mouth broad.

Numbly Lara imagined her mother transposed beside the plainswoman: the one woman short and heavily built, with blunt fingers and dense white hair; the other tall and lean, her fingers long and powerful, her streaked hair coarse upon her shoulders. "Who are you?" Lara demanded numbly.

"I'm Tehla and I believe you've put harness to this mare without knowing anything about her. Do you know if she and her buck have completed their season's mating? Do you know if she has conceived? Do you know what care she must have if she is carrying a foal and what things the fetus needs to grow properly?"

Lara stared at the guardian, disconcerted. Was that what she cared about? Not that Lara had come stealing redmanes, but that she stole them in ignorance? "I don't know any of those things."

"Is that how a breeder works then—from ignorance? Does your guild breed sheep knowing nothing about them? You are a breeder, aren't you?"

Hot blood stung Lara's face. Her valley's sheep were among the finest, her guild among the proudest. "How are we supposed to know anything when you bring the redmanes to the valleys and then refuse even to let us examine them in their pens?"

"How indeed?" Tehla responded. Her obliquely set eyes were like stones: flat, dark, impenetrable.

Lara frowned and reached a decision. She would not be toyed with. If Tehla did not want her to take the redmanes, she could speak directly. Lara turned and spoke to the mare again. "Ho-eee!" She tugged sharply at the harness.

"One thing you don't know is the proper intonation of the instruction," Tehla said when the mare did not move. "Another is that you should steal your animals just before dawn, when they're rested. These animals will slow you."

Lara turned back, her temper rising sharply. "What does that matter? If you don't intend to stop me, why should I hurry?"

Tehla's weathered face did not darken, but her eyes remained like stone. "It matters because you have let your waterskin go dry. I see it hanging there flat. And if you take the direct route, you won't find water until you reach the first mountain spring. You will be very thirsty by then and so will the 'manes.'"

"I'll reach the springs within hours," Lara snapped. She had only to cross the distance she had crossed since sunset.

"Not with these animals, not unless you learn to lead them properly."

"Then teach me!" Lara spat. Better the guardian openly declare against her than continue to inflict her steady gaze upon her. "Teach me the proper commands and the proper intonations!"

Her desperate scorn did not touch Tehla. Tehla shook her head. "I'm not a teacher. You must sit to a teaching if you want to learn the ways of the redmanes."

Lara glanced sharply at Tehla. "A teaching?"

"That's how we learn the ways. We sit to the teachings from the time we're children in arms. By the time we're women, we can distinguish the footfall of an individual animal within the herd—and from a great distance. We can monitor the rhythm of its heart, the surge of its blood. If an animal becomes alarmed or angry, we know. If its sleep is disturbed, we waken. A guardian can tell which mares are carrying live foals and which dead—and when they will deliver. Raizel, tell this valley woman—" Tehla paused, raising her brows in question.

"Lara."

"Tell Lara about the foal her mare is carrying. Is it female or male?"

Lara turned. The first guardian swept back the hood of her cape, letting dark hair fall to her shoulders. Her skin was smooth and dark, her oblique eyes widely set. Her face held the same latent strength as Tehla's, but there was something in the way shadow carved her dark features that made Lara feel Raizel looked upon something no one else saw.

Raizel swept an oblique gaze over the mare. She spoke huskily, as if her voice were days unused. "The mare carries a buck foal. It's

very well developed, grandmother. She will deliver it soon after the next wintersleep."

"It will be an early foal then."

"Yes, it grows quickly. It is strong."

Tehla turned back to Lara. "So you selected your breeding pair well, Lara. The buck is not as well muscled as he could be and the mare's coat is thin. But you're a breeder. You've learned from your sheep to see beyond an animal's superficial faults to the strengths it will pass to its offspring."

Lara stared at Raizel's impassive features. Did she believe this woman could glance at the mare and see the foal in its sac? "How—who teaches you this?" Her voice carried a hard edge of skepticism.

"The eldest mare of our herd. We sit by the spring on clear nights and she teaches us."

Lara glanced sharply at Tehla, certain she was being mocked. But the guardian's face remained impassive. Lara bowed her head, suddenly shrinking with exhaustion. She had walked too far today and she had learned too much. Or perhaps she had learned too little. She shook her head, trying to clear it. "If there's a place where I can sleep—" Apparently they did not intend to drive her away, and surely tomorrow she would understand better.

"You can sleep in my kefri," Tehla said, and turned away. Raizel walked after her.

Lara stared after them in confusion, then realized she was to follow. Warily she unharnessed the mare and did so.

They made their way through the sleeping herd to a cluster of clay domes liberally plastered with hardened mud, bleak and unprepossessing by moonlight. Inside, the walls of Tehla's kefri were hung with coarse netting and an assortment of implements. There was an ash-strewn firepit at the center of the floor and platforms nearby that held bedding. Lara peered around, trying not to think of stone corridors softly lit by clinging tendrils of stalklamp or of the clean-swept order of her family's quarters.

She slept on a platform near the fire, wrapped in her cloak, and when she woke the next day she was alone. She sat, momentarily disoriented. What had happened the night before, what she had seen and heard—it all seemed incredible. But she knew she had imagined none of it.

There was a basin of water on the floor beside her bed and a bowl of cooked meal on the table nearby. Lara washed and ate and then, tentatively, stepped out the door.

The campment was empty except for a pair of guardian daughters running down a deserted path. They were long-limbed children, dark and laughing. Lara watched them and wondered bleakly by what process they would one day become guardians, silent and impassive.

Lara hesitated at the edge of the campment. The herd grazed to the north and east. Guardians stood among the animals, tall, solitary, forbidding. Under the guardians' dark gaze, Lara made her way through the herd.

She found the buck and mare she had chosen near the fringe of the herd and watched them through the day. There was so much she needed to know—the gestation period, what assistance the mother would need at birth, what special care the foal might require. The guardians, in enforcing the isolation of the herds, had kept even the most rudimentary knowledge of the redmanes from the valley people.

Now they were going to let her learn? Why? Lara studied the distant guardians uneasily.

Standing among the redmanes through the day, Lara fell into a silence as deep as the guardians. Somewhere at the bottom of that silence, she felt a stirring, an affinity for the redmanes—something more profound than she had ever felt for the sheep she tended in the valley. It was a sensation both comforting and unsettling.

Tehla and Raizel returned to the kefri at dusk and Lara followed. Neither guardian spoke as they made their evening meal. When they had eaten, Tehla went to the door of the kefri. "The sky is clear," she announced. "There will be a teaching tonight."

Instead of anticipation, Lara felt a sudden pang of apprehension.

They left the kefri when the first moon rose. Other guardians joined them as they walked through the campment, their silence as deep as it had been during the day. Only the guardian daughters laughed and talked, running ahead of the others.

A distance beyond the campment was an area of hard-pounded soil, grassless in every direction, that sloped gently to a shallow basin containing a clear pool of spring water. "We sit here, at the top of the slope," Tehla instructed Lara. "The younger guardians and the guardian daughters sit nearer the pond."

"And the—the mare?"

"She'll appear at the other side of the pond. When she comes, place your hands to the ground and let your mind become empty. You must make yourself completely empty before you can receive the teaching."

Lara hesitated, wanting only to flee. Why had she come here?

Learn—from a mare?

She sat anyway, uneasily. Soon an elderly buck appeared and approached the water. His mane hung ragged and the coarse hair of his tail was tangled. But by light of the first moon, his haunches were powerful and he ignored the night breeze that plucked at his dense coat.

He stood for a while beside the pond, gazing up at the assembled guardians. When the last restless daughter settled herself, the buck lowered his head to drink.

"Put your palms to the ground," Tehla whispered. "And your feet."

Lara peered down upon the gathering. The guardian daughters had removed their sandals. "My boots—"

"Your boots won't hinder you if you make yourself still—still everywhere, in your mind, in your body. You must be completely still, Lara."

"Tehla—"

"Lara, you must listen if you want to learn."

Did she want to learn? Subsiding, Lara pressed hands and feet to the ground and gazed down at the pool. The buck drank, then raised his head and shrilled. A mare appeared and padded to the spring to join him. She was older than he and her joints were stiff, but she moved with pondersome grace. As she drank, other redmanes gathered behind her. Soon much of the herd was gathered, heads lowered, eyelids drooping.

The elderly mare raised her head and seemed to peer directly at Lara. Lara returned the gaze, muscles tightening in instinctive resistance. Then, without her consent, her breath seeped away. She closed her eyes and her head fell forward. Even as she wondered what was happening, she felt the level of her thoughts sinking with each sighing breath. Her forehead sank to her drawn-up knees.

The teaching came to her like a possessing consciousness, first reaching tentatively into her mind and senses, then dominating them.

Listen, my herd. The peace of our herd is greater than any in this world. It must be preserved in each of you. So mind me, foals. Pond-water smells different when stingmadders nest in the rocks. It smells this way . . . this way. . . . When it smells so you must not drink or you will surely be stung and the madness that follows the sting will destroy the peace of the herd.

Listen, my herd. The strength of our herd is greater than any in this world. So mind me, mares. There are years when you must not foal. In those years the egg has formed improperly and your offspring

would be so malformed as to hinder you and detract from the strength of the herd. You will know you must not conceive by the tightness of your abdomen when your mate approaches you. It will feel to you . . . this way . . .

Listen, my herd . . .

So the teaching went. Lara lost all consciousness of herself, of Tehla and the other guardians, of the cold breeze that tugged at her cloak. She was aware only of the eldest mare. The eldest mare carried all the knowledge of the redmanes in the tissues of her body. She knew where to find the tenderest grasses at the end of summer, how to locate water when there was drought, how a foal should look and smell when it was born. She knew everything a redmane needed to know to live in peace and strength with the herd.

After a while, Lara no longer looked down upon the eldest mare. Instead she gazed out at the world from the mare's eyes. The mare's senses became hers. She felt the pain of the mare's arthritic joints. She felt the acids that worked in her stomach. And she felt the mare's enduring strength.

But beyond that, Lara was aware of all the experience the mare had gathered in the years of her life. The mare's memories became hers: the sunlight of her youth, the birth-shrill of her first foal, tens of years of moonlight bondings and matings. Lara sought out fresh grazing lands with the mare and tasted lush grasses. She chewed pungent barks. She tossed her head and loped across the plain with the herd, her feet making the soil pound like an earthen heart.

Strength and peace . . . The teaching continued until both moons had crossed the sky. Then the eldest mare turned and padded away. The other redmanes followed.

The teaching was done. Tehla touched Lara's shoulder. "Lara—it's time to go."

Lara lifted her head. For a moment Tehla's words were meaningless. Then Lara gazed around with returning awareness. The redmanes were gone and the guardians were leaving. "I've learned," she said in wonder. "I've learned about the redmanes." The subtlety and immediacy of what she had learned stunned her.

"You've begun to learn. That's all," Tehla said sharply.

Lara hesitated, Tehla's displeasure dissipating some of her wonder. "But now I know enough to take my pairs to the valley."

Tehla stood, frowning. "No. You do not. And that isn't what I brought you here to learn, Lara."

Lara tensed, recognizing something behind Tehla's words she didn't want to see. Stiffly she took her feet. "You—what did you



want me to learn?"

Tehla turned, moonlight filling her oblique eyes. "I thought you would learn why you must not take redmanes to your valley."

"You—" The spell of the teaching dissolved under Tehla's moon-filled gaze. Lara stared after the retreating redmanes, shivering. Make work beasts of animals who had known the life she had shared with the eldest mare? Set herself as their master when they had always been their own masters? How could she even think of it?

But how could she return to the valley without redmanes? She remembered her father's face as she had last seen it and her determination returned. She stared up at Tehla, challenging her. "If you didn't want me to take redmanes, why did you bring me here? Why didn't you send me away—last night, when you caught me harnessing the mare?"

Tehla pulled her heavy cloak close. Her voice was distant. "Would you have gone? Without coming back again and again, until I grew tired of seeing you and let you take your pairs?"

Lara hesitated. "No." If she could think of taking redmanes now, with the eldest mare's teaching so freshly in mind, certainly nothing would have turned her back before.

"Then what good will it do me to speak directly? There are reasons you must not take redmanes. When I was young, I tried to explain them to another young breeder who came as you've come. She didn't believe me. She didn't understand." Frowning, Tehla gazed into the distance.

Lara stirred restlessly. Reasons—reasons beyond those that already troubled her? "What happened?"

Tehla's attention lingered afar, then returned. "She took three pair of redmanes and left our campment. It took her two days to reach the mountains from here. It should have taken her seven more to reach her valley, but she never returned there. Instead she came back here—to the campment, to the herd. For a while I was glad, because she became my friend."

The pain in her voice dismissed Lara's other concerns, made her mouth turn dry. "And then?"

"She lived here long enough to realize her mistake. After that she died."

"But—how?"

"Her spirit died and finally, a few years later, her body stopped breathing." When Lara did not speak, Tehla went on. "If I thought you would listen, I would tell you just one thing: go—tonight—and don't come back. The plain is not a place for a valley woman. This is not the life you are bred for."

"But I don't intend to live here," Lara protested. "I'm—I'm going to take the redmanes to my guild master, in the valley." Yes. She was going to do it. She had to do it, no matter how the teaching haunted her. "We'll work with their bloodlines together. We'll breed the redmanes to live in the valleys, to help with the heavy work there. We'll adapt them." How could Berrel refuse, when she presented him with the nucleus of a herd?

Tehla shook her head. "Lara, that is a breeders' misconception—oh yes, there have been others over the years, besides my friend and you—that they can work with the bloodlines of the redmanes. The 'manes will not have their mates chosen for them. They select their mates themselves each year at bonding time."

As Lara knew, from the teaching. "But if they will let us choose their mates instead, Tehla, if they will let us guide them—if they will let us breed them selectively—" Surely Tehla's friend had explained to her how the breeders' guild had adapted the sheep and fowl to Brakrath's harsh climate after the stranding, increasing their stature and muscular strength, making their coat heavier so they could better endure the cold of the mountains, adapting them

to eat valley grasses.

"They *are* bred selectively, Lara. *They* make the selection."

It was useless to try to explain, to try to share a vision Tehla refused to see. "Then I'll bring my animals back each spring to select new mates." Let Tehla believe that, if she would.

Tehla's eyes narrowed. "Will you, Lara? And what about the teachings? When the first foals are born, their parents can teach them certain things. Other things they can only learn from the teachings."

Lara gazed at her blankly. Of course—the teachings.

"The redmanes have always held teachings, at watering places all over the plain on every clear night of the warmseasons. Do you intend to take an elder mare with you to the valley? And if you do, what will she teach the foals? She won't know anything of the valleys and mountains. She won't know the dangers. She won't know which plants are nutritious and which poisonous. She won't know what barks should be chewed. She won't know where to find water or when to retire for wintersleep. She—"

"The guild will take care of those things. We'll put the redmanes down for wintersleep when we retire. And they can eat grain and hay from our fields. The plow teams do every spring."

"For a short time they do. It isn't their natural diet—and the mountains and valleys aren't their natural habitat. They're a plains breed. They're suited to live here by centuries of living here."

Lara shook her head, annoyed by Tehla's insistent lack of vision. But then Tehla had not watched her father die, his heart crippled by labor beyond his capacity. "Do you think our valley stock was suited to Brakrath when the first-timers came? The first breeders worked for centuries to adapt the sheep, after the other stock died. The guild had to evaluate every new lamb as it was born, had to chart its growth and watch for signs of favorable mutation. The guild—"

"I know all that, Lara."

"Then you know what we can do with the redmanes."

"I know what you must not do," Tehla said with finality, turning away.

Lara watched as Tehla strode back toward the campment, casting a long shadow before her. Lara hesitated, then followed. Where else was she to go?

Tehla did not speak when Lara entered the kefri. Nor did she speak the next morning when Lara strapped on her pack and stepped from the kefri, harnesses and ropes in hand. Lara looked back only once as she walked away. Raizel stood at the door, a pillar of stone.

Lara could read nothing from her oblique eyes.

No one called her back. The morning sun was bright and warm. Lara hurried through the campment and moved among the browsing redmanes. She recognized some regret at defying Tehla, more at leaving the plain. This was a good time on the plain. The grasses were tall and green and before many days the scattered trees would bloom and their juice would run, making their bark pungent. Lara stood for a long while gazing at the tall white clouds. Then she shook herself and searched for the redmanes she had selected.

She found her first pair grazing near the edge of the herd. The mare gazed at her incuriously when she fitted the halter over her head. Lara paused, reaching into herself for a sense of how the commands must be given. There were certain tones that were most pleasing; she had learned that from the teaching. "Ho-eeel!"

The mare raised her head and followed at the tug of the rope. The buck padded silently after her. Leading them through the herd, Lara found the second pair she had selected. Soon she led four redmanes across the plain.

Still no one called her back or attempted to stop her. Apprehension tickled at the base of her skull.

Her intention was to keep a brisk pace, to reach the mountains well before dark. It was not, after all, so far. But the grass was succulent and there were trees with tender bark. Lara walked more and more slowly, savoring the smell of warm soil, letting the redmanes' ropes fall slack. Gradually she fell into reverie. The sun was warm, the breeze welcome. There was no need to pound the soil with anxious feet. No need . . .

Before she knew it, the sun was setting and they had not covered half the distance to the mountains. They stood near a small clump of trees. Lara tied the mares there, knowing the bucks would stay near. Then she spread her bedding and chewed a last chunk of bread from her pack. She wondered vaguely at her mood, at her lack of urgency. There were people in the valley straining to pull heavy loads, to move cruel burdens.

But spring and all the summer stretched ahead. No need to hurry. She rolled into her bedding and slept, dreaming of nothing.

When she woke the next morning, a fifth redmane stood with the others. Extricating herself from her bedding, Lara stared at the animal blankly. She was older than the others, her back bowed, her coat coarse. When she raised her head, Lara saw age in her eyes like a milky film.

Lara rubbed a sleepy hand across her face. When had she joined

the others? And why? Lara's first thought was to drive her away. She had no need for a mare too old to bear foals. But something restrained her. Perhaps the mare would drop away later, when the pace became too brisk. Or perhaps she would leave them at the edge of the plain. If not . . . Lara shrugged and untied the mares.

Despite Lara's intentions, the pace never became brisk that day. She led the redmanes across the plain as if caught in a waking dream, her thoughts bright but unformed. The fresh rains that fell, the earthen perfumes of spring occupied most of her consciousness. Sometimes she fell into reverie and simply stood watching the redmanes browse.

At midafternoon, Lara elected not to walk farther. They neared the edge of the plain, and she didn't want to enter the mountains at dusk. In the mountains were soaring heights and plunging depths, shadows and predators—things to be confronted only by daylight.

She had never been afraid of the mountains before. Lara puzzled over her new uneasiness as she tied the redmanes.

Uneasiness became fear the next morning when she led the five redmanes up the first rocky incline. It was not natural to walk on ground that did not fit flatly under the foot, to risk injury in terrain where the world fell away jaggedly at either side. The grasses of the mountainside were scant and coarse and there were strange plants that might well be poisonous.

And the water—The water of the mountainside fell from the same storm clouds that watered the plain, but it was strong with dissolved minerals. Was it safe to drink?

The redmanes began to shrill that afternoon, the bucks raising their heads and casting their voices against the mountainside. Each time they shrilled, the mares stopped and stood dumbly, heads lowered. Lara stopped too, the echoes cast back by sheer rock walls making her nerves leap.

They stopped for the night beside a mountain pool. Lara lay awake, staring tensely into the surrounding shadows. When she slept, it was uneasily.

Listen, my herd: the health of the herd lies in each of us. This valley woman has asked our company, but she did not bring wrappings for our feet, as our guardians do when we go to draw the plows. These rocks already tear our pads. If we continue to walk with raw feet, we will suffer infections that will weaken us all. We cannot walk these paths in health.

Listen, mares . . .

Numbly Lara emerged from sleep. The air was biting cold. She

sat, drawing one hand across her eyes. The elderly mare stood beside the mountain pool, the others gathered around her, heeding her. The moons lay bright upon the water's surface. For a moment Lara was confused. Then, without thinking, she placed her hands to the ground and emptied herself for the teaching.

Listen, mares: the strength of our herd is greater than any in the world. Yet it is fragile too. There are leaves you must chew when it is time to deliver your foals. These leaves are not to be found except in the plain. Yet this woman does not intend to return us to the plain for foaling and she has not brought the leaves with her. If foaling time finds us in the valley, your labor will be hard and your foals will be damaged. They will detract from the strength of the herd.

Listen, my herd: neither has this woman thought to bring dried plains grasses for us to eat until we reach her valley, as our guardians do. We have only mountain forage to sustain us and it is so rough it will make us ill. And when we reach her valley, this woman intends us to eat valley grains and grasses for all time. We have never lived for more than a few days on such a diet. Who is to say if it will sustain us? This valley woman has asked our company, but there are many things she has not considered.

Listen, bucks: in the union of the herd is our strength. Today you cast your voices in every direction and had no reply. None of our kind are to be found here. We are alone. This valley woman calls upon us to extend the strength of our herd to her, and we do so. Even so we must not let her lose us in these mountains.

Listen, my herd: ours is the wisdom of an ancient race. It has come to us over tens of centuries. It is bred in the very tissues of our bodies. But it is plains wisdom. We have no mountain wisdom and no valley wisdom because we are not creatures of those places.

Listen, my herd: we extend the peace of our herd to all. This woman has asked our company in the most pleasing tones. But she does not hear well enough the things we tell her. We must tell her with greater clarity about the strength and peace of our herd and the beauty of the plain.

Listen, my herd: this woman has determined that we and she are to be together. If this is to be, she must live with us where the good grasses grow and where no rocks tear our pads. There are foods for her there and she already knows much of our herd. She must become a woman of the plain. Her mountains and valleys are no place for us.

Listen, my herd: we freely offer this woman the peace of our herd. If she would live as a woman of the redmanes, she must return with us to the plain. There she will better learn our ways and she will bear

daughters to stand among us.

Hear me, mares . . .

The teaching continued. As Lara sank wholly into shared consciousness with the elder mare, she saw with the mare's eyes the un wisdom of what she tried to do. She felt with the mare's heart the pain of separation from the herd.

And as the teaching continued, Lara understood more clearly the beckoning beauty of the plain, the ecstasy of its seasons and its moods, the joy of its broad and open spaces. She ached for the good things there and she ached for the herd. Bonding and mating time were past now, but other herd-times lay ahead: the running of the yearlings, the midsummer drive to the lakelands, the sun-drummings of early autumn. There were ancient rituals associated with each of these and they could only be observed in the plain.

Strength and peace. . . . There was no life apart from the life of herd.

The teaching continued until near dawn. Then Lara and the redmanes slept briefly before they turned back toward the plain. The redmanes padded briskly down paths they had climbed reluctantly the day before. Their feet pounded the ground in drum-rhythm. The bucks shrilled and tossed their heads.

They must return to the plain. That thought was clear and compelling. The strength of the herd lay in the plain.

But Lara was a valley woman. Wasn't that what the elder mare had called her in the teaching? *This valley woman* . . . She had been born to the stonehalls. For her, no matter how hard the life, beauty was the sweep of rocky slopes and the order of cultivated fields. She was not born to the empty spaces of the plain. She was born to live with her own people.

Her own people . . . Lara scarcely thought of them as the redmanes led her back across the plain, taking a circuitous route to the herd's grazing grounds. They stopped that night near a running stream and the elder mare taught again. When Lara finally slept, she dreamed of grasses and barks and the pounding of padded feet.

The next day she walked with the redmanes and the shadow of the plain fell upon her. Her gaze became distant, her lips still. Even the wind seemed to speak to her of the herd, of its strength and peace.

That afternoon they approached the fringes of the herd and the redmanes pounded forward eagerly, shrilling. Lara halted, a last vestige of resistance racking her, making her muscles rigid. *A valley woman—I'm a valley woman.*

A tall figure stood against the sky. Reluctantly Lara approached. Tehla's hood was thrown back. Her white-streaked hair rose on the wind. Lara bowed her head. "I—I want to go," she said. The words were wispy, unreal. So were her wishes. She was torn between the herd and the valley where her people lived.

"Yet you have returned."

"I want to go," Lara repeated. But she wanted to stay too, to stand with Tehla against the afternoon sky, to be a woman of the herds. She gazed around in confusion. The elder mare had followed her and watched her with milky eyes.

"Do you understand now why you must not take redmanes to the valley?" Tehla demanded.

Lara nodded numbly. "They won't live there. They *could*, if they would let us work with their bloodlines, if they would let us help them change—" If the redmanes would come with her, the guild could breed them to adapt their offspring to eat the grasses and roughage that grew in the mountains and in the valleys. Their padded feet could be bred tough, so the animals could walk rocky trails without injury. In the warm seasons they could pull carts and sledges. They could haul stones from rock-bound fields and take them where they were needed for building dikes and pens. They could lend their strength to many efforts to make life in the valleys bearable. And their own lives would be bearable too. "Tehla, if they would just let us try. If—"

Tehla shook her head regretfully. "You don't understand at all, child."

"But I do. I can't take them to the valleys because they won't go." The redmanes were afraid of the mountains and they projected their yearning for the plain so strongly Lara was powerless against it. But if she could make them understand—

She turned and gazed over the grazing animals. *Make them understand?* How could she make the redmanes understand about life in the valleys, about the need her people had, when their awareness was so bound to the plain? How could she make them understand when she was so vulnerable to their longing for the herd?

It was so green here, the perfumes of spring so sweet. . . .

She shook her head in confusion, knowing that unless she fought, she would fall into reverie again. "Tehla—" she pleaded.

Tehla sighed, her obliquely set eyes bleak. "A distance from here is a place we call the pinnacles. There is a teaching there, a very special teaching, by the eldest mare of all the redmanes. I will take you tonight—if you won't turn now and go back to your valley."

Lara hesitated, weighing conflicting urges. There had to be a way to do what she had come to do. Too many had already been crippled in the valleys by labor the redmanes could perform easily. "I'll go," she said. "To the teaching."

"I thought you would." The words were regretful.

They left at midafternoon and walked southward, leaving herd and campment behind. The elderly mare accompanied them, her milky eyes downcast. They walked through the late afternoon and early evening. They passed solitary trees and small groves, passed other herds and other campments. Redmanes and guardians looked after them with incurious stares.

The night air became cool. Still they walked, until Lara saw a tall rock formation ahead. She glanced at Tehla, expecting the older woman to mark the occasion with a comment. Tehla did not speak.

The pinnacles reared above the plain like jagged stone fingers, severe against the starlit sky. At their base was a basin of water so clear the moons seemed to dance upon its surface. Gathered near the water were redmanes. They stood completely motionless, heads bowed, eyelids drooping. All of them, Lara saw, were mares long past their prime.

Tehla led Lara through the redmanes to sit at the water's edge. They waited as the moons crossed an arc of sky. Then the redmanes stirred and an ancient mare appeared from the shadows at the base of the pinnacles.

She was older than any redmane Lara had yet seen, her fur patchy, her gait hobbling. Yet there was still a stubborn strength in her as she approached the water. Stiffly she lowered her head to drink.

When she raised her head, Lara saw that Tehla had placed hands and feet to the ground. Lara hesitated, then did the same. She exhaled, letting her thoughts seep away with her breath.

The teaching seemed to come from a great distance, in a voice at once thin and reverberant. *My time among you is short, my peers. It is measured in seasons rather than years. I charge you with the teaching of your herds.*

Hear me, my peers. You are the elders who carry the wisdom of our herds in your flesh. You are the few with the coherence of thought to understand that wisdom and to teach it, and in your teaching lies our strength and our peace.

Yet there are decisions that are difficult even for you. I look into your minds and I see each of you has a special concern tonight. Each of you needs special guidance and I will give it.

Makir, there is a buck in your herd who mistreats his mate. He

jostles her and pounds her with his feet. Today he pressed her against a tree so brutally he crippled one of her legs. The leg will heal but the sickness in the buck's spirit destroys the harmony of your herd. You hesitate to drive him away, but if you do not, he will only give his mate foals with spirits as mean as his. You must drive him away. Then if his mate has conceived, you must lead her to eat the sour bulbs that grow at the base of the tearbush, so the fetus will be flushed away.

Koyika, there is a rule we use when a foal wanders. You must use it now, however hard it seems. You must instruct the mother to let the foal you are concerned with go where it will. She must not follow after it and she must not guide it back. She must let it learn by itself that it requires the company of the herd. If it does not learn this lesson, it is because the foal is unfit for the herd and its presence could only be disruptive.

Lara's head dropped to her knees as the teaching continued. Decisions, so many decisions. Unconsciously Lara hugged her knees and burrowed deeper into the eldest mare's consciousness. There were memories there stretching back over centuries, memories passed from mare to mare, yet still fresh: memories of all the warm seasons the herd had known, memories of the sunrises of centuries.

She lost herself in them, until some instinct called her back.

Ferbik, the problem you and Tehla bring is more difficult than any other. This valley woman has tasted the peace and strength of our herd. You could not have prevented it. Indeed it is our nature to draw others in, if they have the perception to understand what we offer. But what we offer is not what this woman requires.

The first valley women who came to us were lonely spirits, full of conflict. They could not find their place among their own people. They took peace and strength from us and stayed to become the first guardians.

This valley woman is not such a person. She did not come to live among us and if she stays, it will not be happily. Yet we cannot exclude her. Just as the foal must be permitted to wander until it understands its need for the herd, so this valley woman must be permitted to stay until she understands why she must leave.

Lara stirred restively. Stay until she understood? It was Tehla, Ferbik, the elder mare who did not understand. Impulsively Lara pressed her hands to the soil and breathed deeply, gathering and focusing her thoughts, trying to project them. *Mare, listen. I want to leave but my people have a need. Life is hard in our valleys. If you can look into my mind, you can see how hard. If the redmanes would*

come, if they would help— They come now in the spring to plow. But we need more. We need—

You need nothing we can give you.

NO! Lara put all her force into the protest. Let the redmanes come with me and we'll build herds for them in the valleys. We've learned to live there—we've adapted—and they can too. The first humans who came to Brakrath were not like us at all. We—

You have changed much, just as our guardians are very different from the first valley women who came to live with the herds. But some things remain constant. One is the strength and peace of our herds. Another is our love for the plains.

Mutely Lara shook her head. No, let me teach, she demanded. Let me teach you what the redmanes can find in our valleys. If she could make the vision bright enough, clear enough—

Teach—she had to teach, even if no human had ever taught to redmanes. Lara balled her hands into fists and ground them hard against the soil. She already saw the redmanes as the guild could make them: tall, proud animals with self-armored feet and silver coats, at once imposing and graceful, spirited and willing. Quickly, before the elder mare could reject her vision, Lara projected it.

Redmanes grazing in the orchards in spring, sunlight striking through new blossoms to bathe their silver coats with color. Redmanes standing patiently as children combed their auburn manes. Redmanes being bedded at night by loving hands, stone walls to shelter them, the sweet smell of hay on the air. Redmanes gathering by clear mountain streams to be taught by mares who knew valley ways.

Redmanes content in the peace and strength of their valley herds. Redmanes . . . Lara fought to teach what she saw in all its clarity.

But was her vision clear? She squeezed her eyes shut, disturbed by details that refused to resolve. Were these silver-coated animals really redmanes? Or were they fantasy creatures, born from imagination, bred by need?

If they were real, why did her teaching falter and trail away? Why did her hands slacken? There were people dying in the valleys, broken by hardship. Why couldn't she hold the saving vision?

You are troubled, valley woman, because you have recognized the reality of our nature and your teaching does not incorporate that reality.

It does! Lara insisted desperately. Her nails cut the palms of her hands, her teeth marked her lip. She could not relinquish the dream she had made, could not renege on the promise she had whispered over her father's dying body.

But beyond her vision of valley herds lay another vision. It had waited there since the first teaching, unrecognized. She had no choice but to recognize it now. She served no one by refusing reality.

Lara expelled a sobbing breath and did the hardest thing she had yet done: called up a vision she did not want to see.

Redmanes plowing valley fields, their heads bowed with longing for the plains. Redmanes standing bleakly in strange pens, tasting dry fodder with reluctant tongues. Redmanes gathered around icy valley streams to be taught by mares who carried aching memories of the plain in the very tissues of their bodies.

And gathered near, valley people—field monitors who had held the redmanes' traces as they plowed and felt a first affinity for the animals, stonemasons who had loaded carts for the redmanes to pull and come away with a disturbing sense of loneliness, children who had groomed them and dreamed of a place where tall grasses grew, breeders who had begun to recognize the peace and strength that lay in the great herds of the plain.

Lara shook her head, trying to deny what she saw. *They'll change—the redmanes will change*, she insisted.

As your people have changed? How long has that taken, valley woman?

Centuries. Her people had struggled in the valleys for centuries. They had scratched in the dirt, they had adapted seeds and stock, and they had let Brakrath change them in turn, altering them in so many small ways that they were a different race from the people stranded here.

No, they were *two* different races, valley dwellers and guardians.

Even so, valley people still spoke lingeringly of the warm worlds where their ancestors had lived before the stranding. They still sang of golden flowers and strange fruits and dreamed, fleetingly, of brilliant skies. She had dreamed so herself.

So it would be with the redmanes. She saw that now. It would take centuries to cleanse them of their inbred love of the plain.

But with a difference. The valley people could not return to their lost warmworlds. They had no means. But the redmanes could return to the plain. No matter how strong the pens that confined them, no matter how high the walls that contained them, they could return. Because when they yearned for tall grasses and pungent barks, the valley people who tended them would feel that yearning too—and set the redmanes free.

Then field monitors and stonemasons, children and animal tenders, breeders and scribes, would desert their valleys to follow the

redmanes to the plain.

Tears formed at the corners of Lara's eyes. She wrenched her hands from the earth and stood. Vestiges of the eldest mare's consciousness lingered with her, then faded.

She turned and found that Tehla stood too. "Tehla—when you come to the valleys with the plow teams, you stand guard. But you—you aren't guarding the redmanes against us." Her voice trembled with the truth she finally accepted.

"No," Tehla agreed. "We're guarding the valley people."

"From the redmanes."

Tehla nodded. "Yes, Lara. The 'manes come willingly to plow. They have from the time of the first guardians. It's a small enough service, but the largest they can give. Because no matter how willingly they come, their thoughts are always of the plain. That's their nature, to think of the grasses that feed them and the company of their kind."

And they projected those thoughts with an aching clarity, a compelling urgency. "So if you didn't keep us from them—if you let us feed and tend them—we would come back to the plain with them. To the herds." Just as she had come back earlier today, helplessly. It was a human instinct, too, to want to be part of a larger whole—and at peace.

But she could not be a part of this whole. Her place was in the valley.

"The vulnerable would come. The ones—like you—who are sensitive to the redmanes."

And who could guess how many that would be? Or how greatly their loss would weaken the valleys. "Then there's no way we can be together—your people, mine, and the redmanes."

Slowly Tehla pulled up her hood, shadowing her face. She was long in speaking. "There is no way now, Lara. But there is a flaw in your thinking—a flaw I have seen from the first, when you spoke of altering the redmanes. Do you think of your own people as a finished creation, Lara? Do you think they have reached a final and unchangeable form?"

Lara looked at her blankly. "I—" Hadn't they? After all these centuries?

"You've told me of the changes that have come in humans since they were stranded on Brakrath—and the changes that have come in our two peoples since they were separated. I believe my people are a finished creation now. We have adapted to the plains. We live here with the herds in peace and strength.

"But the path still lies steep and stony before your people. Brakrath is testing you far more sternly than it ever tested us, and the testing continues. I believe that's because your people are a continuing creation—and I believe Brakrath intends ultimately to make something greater of you than it has made of us."

Lara chilled, as if the sudden loss of preconceptions left her cold. She had never thought of her people that way—as the subjects not of a finished process but of a continuing one. "What—what could it make of us?" What more than it had already made, a people who fought hardship with inadequate resources, yet still survived?

Tehla gazed at her obliquely. "Child, I think this land has a vision of what can be made of humans, just as you had a vision of what could be made of redmanes. I can't see what that ultimate creation will be, but I think that one day your people will walk among the herds and not be subjugated by them. Because you will have attained a peace and strength of your own."

Peace and strength—conferred by a testing land, continuing change its instrument. Disturbed, Lara peered southward across the plain.

As she looked, a faint light glowed upon the southern horizon and the moons dimmed overhead. The effect lasted only moments. Lara turned to Tehla, her voice shaken. "What—what was that?"

"You saw it in the teachings. The southern herds are drumming the sun. They do it sometimes even at this time of year, although our own herds will not go south to drum until autumn."

Lara nodded, remembering. In the first teaching, she had gone with the eldest mare to a place where the land was cupped in a broad bowl of dark rock. When the redmanes pounded the soil with their feet, the jagged rocks shook so fiercely they pulled light from the sun and made a fierce blaze of it, a blaze that was trapped deep within the rocks themselves. Once the eldest mare had tried to approach the glowing rocks and had been driven back by heat. Later a buck foal had driven himself so near his mane and tail were turned to ash.

Lara held her breath as the southern horizon lighted again. Somehow she recognized its brief brilliance as a sign—a sign that what Tehla said was true. Her people must let themselves be tested by hardship until they overcame it—not by changing the redmanes to serve them but by letting themselves be changed even more profoundly than they had already been changed.

Evolution—the redmanes would not have it forced upon them, but her people must accept it. Lara sighed deeply, marking the moment

of her personal acceptance. "I have to go," she said.

"Yes. I'll walk with you."

They left the pond and set back across the plain, walking silently. Tehla did not speak as she led Lara through the sleeping herd, but she watched from hooded eyes.

She watched as Lara walked without hesitation through and away from the herd, touched but no longer hindered. Her people's future didn't lie in harnessing the redmanes. It lay in permitting their own evolution to continue, either through myriad small changes or in a few leaping changes that would alter the face of the valleys forever.

The horizon lit twice again as they walked. Finally, when they stood at the edge of the plain, it glowed once more, this time with sunrise. Tehla stood against the rising sun, her weathered faceshadowed. Reluctantly Lara clasped her hand, then relinquished it. "Someday," she said finally, from a dry throat. She could not guess where the path would lead, but she believed that time would bring her people and Tehla's together again one day.

Time and change.

Tehla was long in responding. "Someday, Lara."

Time and change. Lara lingered for a moment at the foot of the trail. As she began to climb, it seemed to her that the sun dimmed and the southern horizon glowed again. But when she turned, the sun was as it had been and Tehla still stood before it, her face shadowed.

WAR NERVES

Though Herbert G. Wells was accused
Of shyness each time he refused
To pose for depiction,
In truth, his affliction
Was fear of those tripods they used!

—John D. Seats

LETTERS

We read—and appreciate—the letters we get; the letters of praise and—yes, even so—of criticism. Keep on sending them, to IA'sfm, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017. This is also the address for manuscripts, and our letters on format and story requirements (free for a stamped, self-addressed envelope).

We also get letters asking that something be Done. It is much easier to Do Something if the letter can be expeditiously gotten to the Doer, which usually means someone other than the editors. Therefore: On subscription matters, including changes of address, send to Box 1933, Marion OH 43305. To get your convention into the Calendar, write Erwin Strauss, 9850 Fairfax Square #232, Fairfax VA 22031 (as far in advance as possible). All other correspondence for the publisher, such as the Advertising Department, goes to our New York address.

If something that needs Doing requires a Reply, same will be expedited if you enclose a stamped reply envelope.

But Don't stop writing, whatever you Do.

Dear George, Shawna, and the Good Doctor,

I've been going through some recent issues of your magazine. There's good news and bad. Two stories I didn't think much of: Gregory Benford's "Exposures" in the July 6 issue was overly technical. It did not flow smoothly; so if it had a point, I missed it. Somtow Sucharitkul's "The Dust" in the August 3 edition was unconvincing. It could not suspend my disbelief.

Those are the only two real gripes I have. The July 6 mag was salvaged by Avram Davidson's "An Abundance of Dragons" and Sharon Webb's "Earthchild Rising." This latter is reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* in that the adult population, not gifted with immortality, turned wild.

Although "The Dust" put me to sleep, "Slac//" by Michael P. Kube-McDowell popped the eyeballs wide open. The Semu were like Heinlein's cat. After sitting on a hot stove lid, the cat will never do it again, but he won't sit on a cold one either. Likewise the Semu; they shoot at Slac//, but also at anything that resembles Slac//.

Somtow redeemed himself with "Mallworld Graffiti" in the August 31 issue. There were similarities between this one and "The Dust," but "M G" came off much better. The ending was brilliant. John

Boardman's "On the Years without a Summer" was especially interesting.

If I'm not mistaken, your story requirements explicitly state that you are not looking for fantasy. Blast and damn! R.A. Lafferty's "You Can't Go Back" and Tony Sarowitz's "Bringing the Chairman to Order" are precisely that. Fantasy! Now I'm not all bent out of shape over it; I won't do anything so childish as letting my subscription expire because of it. I pulled that stunt after collecting a couple rejection slips two years ago. Cutting off my nose to spite my face, so to speak.

All in all, you folks are putting out a top-notch magazine. Ron Goulart's "Ask Penny Jupiter," Sharon Webb's "Reliquary for an Old Soul," and Larry Niven's "Limits" in the September 28 issue are ample proof of that. So you flub the dub now and then. What the heck! Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. You're doing a lot better at selling science fiction than I am.

Sincerely,

Scott Garten
Kansas City KS

If it isn't one science fiction writer, it's another. The remark about the cat and the hot stovelid is not Heinlein's, it belongs to that other SF writer ("Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven"), Mark Twain.

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlefolk,

Dismayed though I may be at challenging the foremost Renaissance Man of the age, I fear I must side with the Good Gray *Times* against the Good Doctor on the topic discussed in his October editorial. From a legal standpoint, being struck by a meteorite is the classic example of an "act of God." Neither the Government nor anyone else is expected to prevent such things. From a practical standpoint, and within a very few decades, any sizable asteroidal object coming anywhere within reach of Earth will be summarily strip-mined out of existence regardless of whether it poses a threat. There are several groups, such as the Japanese, the Soviets, the Europeans, the Texans, and International Nickel, who might be willing to accept the expense and toil (and fun and profit) of seeking these bits of rock and disposing of them; why should the American taxpayer have to spend a plug nickel to "check out the deflectability of an asteroid?"

Reaganomically yours,

Bennett Rutledge
Arlington VA

A stroke of lightning is another classic example of an "act of God," and Franklin's lightning-rod was denounced from the pulpit for being an attempt to circumvent God's anger—but I am on old Ben's side, on that one, too.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers:

I am writing in reference to Mrs. Webb's latest *punishment*, "Our Man In Vulnerable." It is, by far, the best or worst pun yet to grace the pages of *IA'sfm*. It was enough to make me stop eating Twix and *that's* not an easy task.

I would also like to apologize for my remarks on your new logo. You said in your 9/28/81 issue that it takes time to get used to a new cover. I now agree. Although I still like the old one, I no longer hate the new one.

Lastly, I have enclosed an SASE for a copy of manuscript format and story needs. I used to have several but I have been cleaning my room recently and lost them all somewhere. (One of ours is on its way.)

Sincerely,

Andrew J. Nagel
104 Frey Court
Michigan City IN 46360

You must learn to listen to me.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have just read the letter from Irving L. Jacobs in the October 26 issue. In the letter he slams the writings of Sharon Webb.

While I am not overly enthusiastic with the "Bull Run" series by Ms. Webb, I still find the stories amusing. But anyone who could write such things as "Earthchild Rising" and "Reliquary for an Old Soul" is an Author. Even the pun-ny story in the above-cited issue was good writing.

Anybody can be a critic. Damned few can write well. My only

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recommendation for Mr. Jacobs is that, if he doesn't like a particular author's works, he should skip such stories, and he should leave those of us who enjoy such stories alone.

In a recent issue, you discussed the order in which to read the contents of an SF magazine. Well, my preferred method with yours is to read first the editorial, since it is written by Asimov. Next is the letters section, to see what others are thinking. Then the book reviews to learn what's on the market. Following comes science fact and the Martin Gardner puzzles. Last comes the stories. If there's one by Asimov or Webb, it is to be saved till last, as "dessert." If there are stories by both in the same issue, both go to the end of the process, and a coin decides which will actually be last.

The point of all this is, the first science fiction printed of Ms. Webb's—that I'm aware of—was "Hitch on the Bull Run," which appeared in your magazine. Therefore, I credit you and George Scithers, et al., with her "discovery." There have been many others. But Mr. Jacobs went to lengths to attack Ms. Webb's stories, and I couldn't let it pass. For Heaven's sake, don't ever give up on introducing new authors. One Sharon Webb or one Barry Longyear, etc., a year is fantastic, when you compare the number of new authors in the other SF mags. But *IA'sfm* brings new writers to the reading public's attention constantly. I'm certain most of your readers appreciate the fresh insights—else you wouldn't still be in business. So, for those of us who appreciate your efforts, thank you.

Sincerely,

Ed Brady

We must be fair. A writer isn't necessarily good because he or she is new; but it is always pleasant to find one who is both. And I think Sharon Webb is very good.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

We have never been formally introduced. Those preliminaries have been accomplished through the pages of this fine publication. Thank you and your staff for the excellence of *Asimov's sfm*. Of course an accolade would not be complete without at least one reference to the great guiding (almost god-like) influence of the Good Doctor.

(Won't hurt to butter the old guy up, will it?)

Enough. Now to get to the *real* reason for this letter. My mother

subscribes to *Asimov's sfm* and recently loaned me a few issues. She has yet to see them returned. However, she feels that I should submit some of my own worthless scribblings for your evaluation. Therefore, I am requesting information on ms format and needs. A SASE is enclosed.

I'll let my stories speak for themselves once you've had an opportunity to examine them. I have only one request: If my material is rejected, could I *please* have it personally autographed by both you and Dr. Asimov? I'll hang it on the wall for all my science fiction buddies to drool over.

Almost quivering with ill-repressed anticipation:

David Bruce Bozarth
Bellaire TX

*There's an old song that says: "A boy's best friend is his mother."
—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Isaac and George,

I read with delight James Gunn's story, "The North Wind," in your Oct. 26 issue. I had the privilege of first hearing Jim read the story in July at his course for science fiction teachers at the University of Kansas, where I was a student. So I was looking forward to seeing it in print.

This story is in keeping not only with his fine talent as a writer of fiction (an often-overlooked talent among his many others as critic, reviewer, and historian), but also with his undaunted optimism about the human race's potential for ultimate survival.

Here's thinking of you, Jim!

Kathy Romer
Winchester MA

The trouble with Jim is, that since I first met him, a quarter-century ago, he scarcely looks a day older, the dirty mumble-mumble.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Scithers:

I am writing in regard to the letter written by Ralph D. Bell which was printed in the Sept. 28, 1981 issue of this magazine. I am moved to second his complaint, although I will word it somewhat differently. I am not satisfied with the trend of the style of *Isaac Asimov's*

Science Fiction Magazine. For the most part the stories are either not science fiction or they are terribly frivolous.

In regards to whether or not a story is science fiction, it is seldom that I feel a story is out of place. An example did occur in the same issue as Mr. Bell's letter, however. "Lirios" by James Tiptree, Jr. was an excellent story and I am glad that I read it. However, it would have been better placed in *Steven King's Magazine of the Macabre*. The story was nothing other than a ghost story.

The matter of the frivolous atmosphere of the rest of the magazine is another thing. Not all the stories are this way. Some are downright good, and some of these are first sales too. For the sake of these stories I continue to subscribe. However, I do not consider frivolousness a good quality in science fiction, and I am finding more and more of it in this magazine. My complaint was intensified when I recently started reading *Analog*, which, in my opinion, is a superior magazine to this one.

Sincerely,

Robert B. Mead
318 N. 52nd St., Apt D
Phoenix AZ 85008

There is an old nursery rhyme that says: "A little nonsense now and then / Is relished by the wisest men." I take that to mean that the wisest men relish a little nonsense, and that not relishing it is a sign that one falls short of full wisdom. —So please be content to smile now and then.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Although you profess to know very little about poetry, your editorial on poetry in science fiction was the best, most succinct bit of writing on the subject of *any* kind of poetry, science fiction or not, that I have encountered in a very long time.

My purpose in writing now, however, is to praise a particular poem you published in your June 8, 1981 issue. The poem is "Pavlov's Cat" by Don Anderson. Excellent! Even though I like poetry (I used to be poetry editor for a small Libertarian magazine), I have not been generally that impressed with what I have seen that you've published up to now, finding much of it mere doggerel. Admittedly I have not seen all of the poetry you have published as I am not (yet) a subscriber, but Don Anderson's piece has got to be right up there

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at the very top.

Speaking of mere doggerel, please send me your editorial requirements and format sheet so that I might submit my own poor effort along that line. SASE enclosed.

Thank you,

Clarica Dee Labuscher
3045 Hollycrest Drive
Hollywood CA 90068

Good! Knowing nothing about poetry, I always find it pleasurable to read something, anything, by someone who does.

—Isaac Asimov

Attention, Staff,

Concerning the new logo: it is bold, it is simple, and it is a vast improvement over the original logo. Having made a wise move, I trust that you shall keep it.

Concerning the cover of the September issue: just what *is* the cover of the September issue, anyway? A pearl in a glass of red wine? A platinum bowling ball, perhaps? Maybe a silicon spheroid blocking the light from a distant sun? Rorschach would have had a field day with the cover of the September issue. Upon examining the Table of Contents I discovered that the cover was, simply, *Untitled* . . . I think that an appropriate title would have been *Irrelevant*.

Concerning the September issue from the *inside*: I enjoyed reading the issue, in general, but there was nothing that stood out like a penguin in the African veldt. Not a great issue, but worth all of a buck and a half.

Concerning the vast majority of letters which you see fit to print; why is it that most of the letters that find their way into your Letters column are just so much blatant crap? Anyone can brown-nose, but it takes a consistent devotion to your magazine to prompt the (all too rare) letter of interesting and relevant commentary relating directly to the contents of a previous issue of the magazine itself. That is what the Letters column is for, isn't it? Free space for letters of positive and negative criticism of the magazine's contents . . . not a place for some two-digit occasional typist to brown-nose his or her way into print, never mind the extreme of mindless, empty praise, which has about as much depth as a thin-crust pizza, which must be reached (in many people's rather small minds) in order for this to happen. Let's see more relevant commentary and less (i.e., none)

of the mindless drivel and petty sludge that has so often occupied unjustifiable space in your Letters column in the past.

In closing, why don't you get a hold of Harlan Ellison and see if he would contribute some short fiction to your magazine? I know that it would make all of us Ellison fans out here in Dreamland happy (even if only for the duration of an issue, or three).

Typographically yours,

Douglas Wise
4185 Timberlane Drive
Allison Park PA 15101

Yes, yes, but where's the relevant commentary? And have you ever tried to get hold of Harlan Ellison against his will? You want a broken kneecap?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

After reading my July and August issues, I must say I'm very happy and satisfied with re-subscribing. I was late in renewing this year and am now more than delighted to be back in the flow again.

There is something very personal in your magazine. Accomplishments feel shared and a blooper we groan over together. I missed the gossip letters as much as the stories.

My husband keeps telling me we'd be rich if I would ever get off the lazy, hate to re-write syndrome, so please send me a list of your writers' requirements. (Done.) Perhaps if I send you a few stories I'll be able to quit littering the house with half-finished tales.

Thank you,

Linda Burch
Norwalk IA

Remember Asimov's umpty-umpth Rule: Even rejection-slip litter is an advance over half-finished-tales litter.

—Isaac Asimov

NEXT ISSUE

The May 1982 issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* will be just that, *May*. As you may have noticed on the cover of the issue you're holding, we've stopped using specific dates. But we'll still be doing thirteen issues per year; the thirteenth issue this year will fall in November and will be our special Holiday issue.

As to the contents of the May issue, we'll be having a new story by Mildred Downey Broxon, as well as an all-too-rare appearance by Jack C. Haldeman II, plus much more. On sale April 13, 1982.

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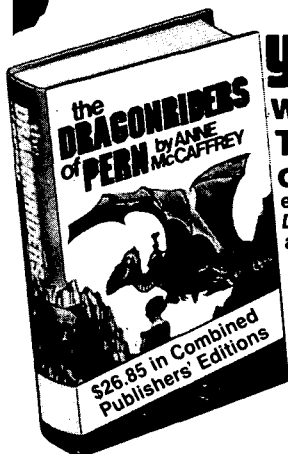
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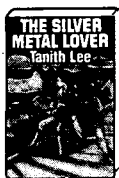
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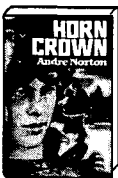
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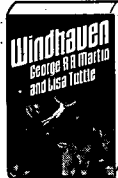
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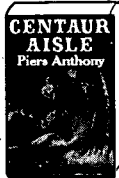
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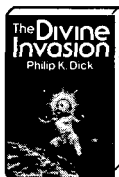
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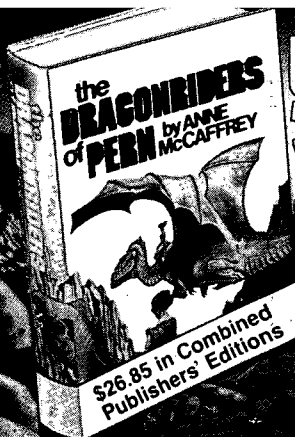
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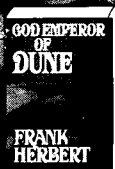
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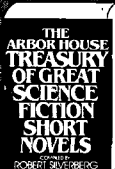
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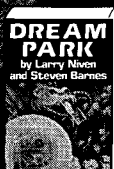
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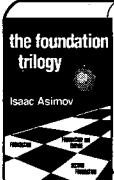
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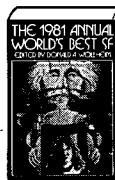
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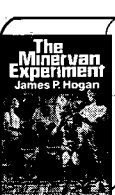
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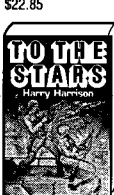
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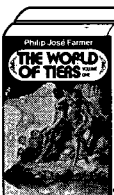
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